

THE END OF BYZANTIUM

JONATHAN HARRIS



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THE END OF BYZANTIUM

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JONATHAN HARRIS

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*In Memory of Konstantinos Ikonomopoulos
(1980–2009)*

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Illustrations and Maps

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7. Gold and enamel pendant reliquary (base of the pendant showing St Demetrius) © The Trustees of the British Museum.
8. Pisanello's medal of John VIII Palaiologos © The Trustees of the British Museum.
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10. Tomb of Mehmed I (1413–1421), Bursa. Shutterstock Images.
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Acknowledgements

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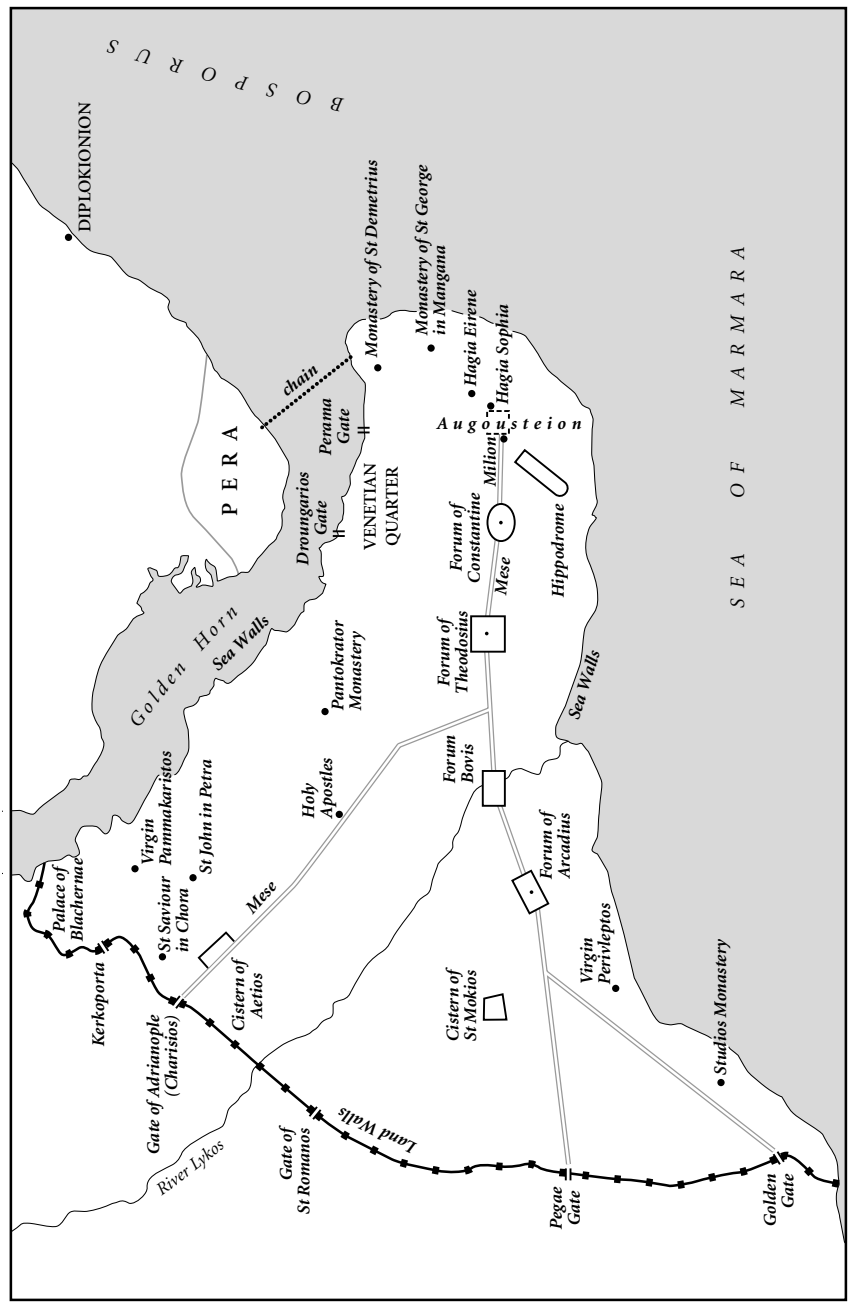
I should also note here that there is no particular purpose behind the spellings of Byzantine and Turkish names that I have chosen. I have tried to transliterate Byzantine names as closely as possible to the original Greek, hence 'Palaialogos' rather than 'Palaeologus', 'Kritovoulos' rather than 'Kritoboulos' or 'Critobulus'. When it comes to Turkish personal names, I have used the older versions, 'Mehmed' rather than 'Mehmet' and 'Murad' rather than 'Murat'. Cities in Europe are given by their anglicised Greek name where one exists: 'Constantinople' rather than 'Istanbul', 'Adrianople' rather than 'Edirne', 'Mesembria' rather than 'Nesebâr' and 'Selymbria' rather than 'Silivri'. Those in Asia Minor generally appear under their modern Turkish names: 'Bursa' rather than 'Prousa' and 'Konya' rather than 'Ikonion', but I have preferred 'Ephesus' to 'Efes' and 'Smyrna' to 'Izmir'. In short, I used those versions that seem most natural and familiar to me.

Chronological Table

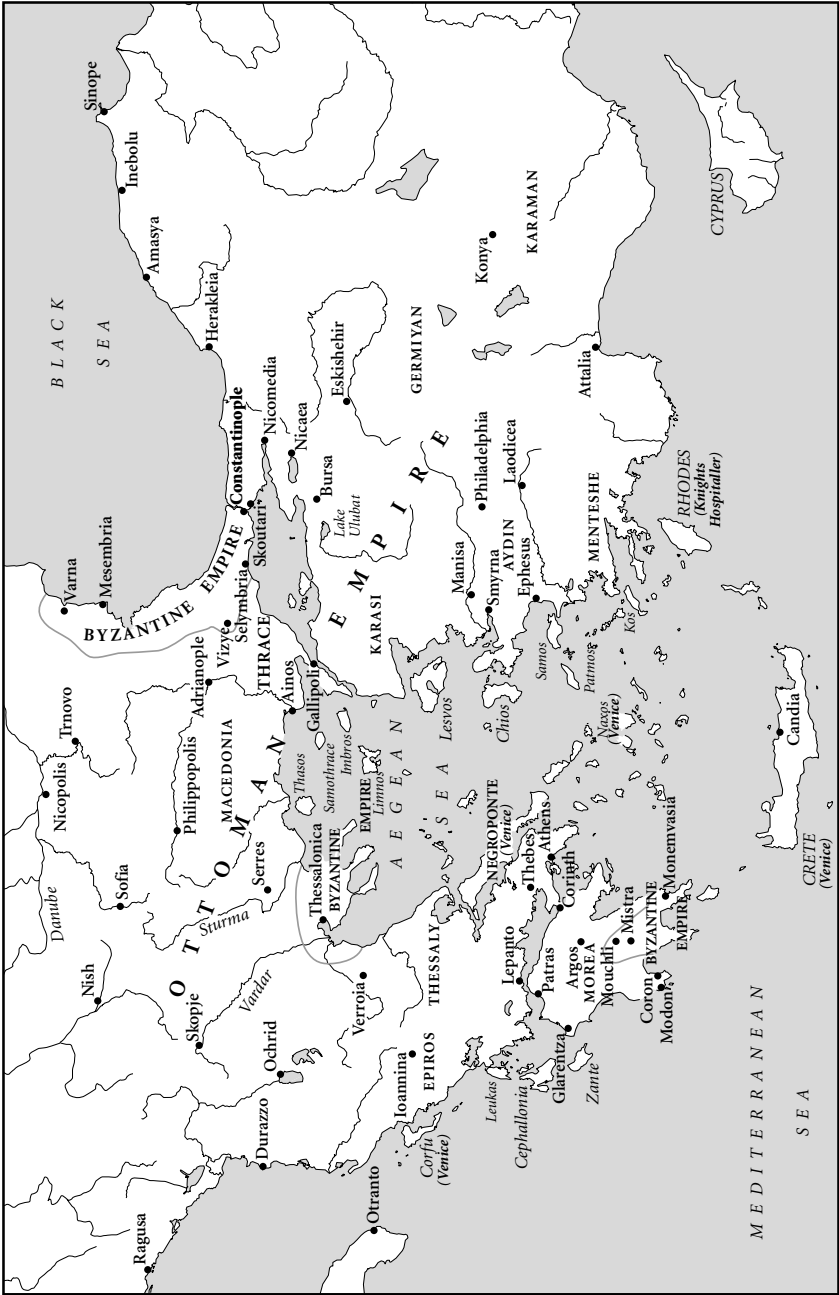
- 1354 Ottomans capture Gallipoli
- c.1361 Ottomans capture Adrianople
- 1366 Count Amadeo of Savoy recaptures Gallipoli
- 1369 Visit of John V to Rome
- c.1372 John V becomes an Ottoman vassal
- 1376 Andronicus IV seizes Constantinople
- 1385 Death of Andronicus IV
- 1387 Surrender of Thessalonica to Murad I
- 1389 Battle of Kosovo. Accession of Bayezid I
- 1390 John VII seizes Constantinople
- 1391 Death of John V, succeeded by Manuel II
- 1394 Bayezid I lays siege to Constantinople
- 1396 Defeat of Crusade of Nicopolis
- 1399 Manuel II leaves for the West
- 1402 Timur defeats Bayezid I at Ankara.
- 1403 Byzantine-Ottoman Treaty. Return of Manuel II
- 1408 Death of John VII
- 1411 Overthrow of Suleyman by Musa
- 1413 Overthrow of Musa by Mehmed (I), who reunites the Ottoman domains

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

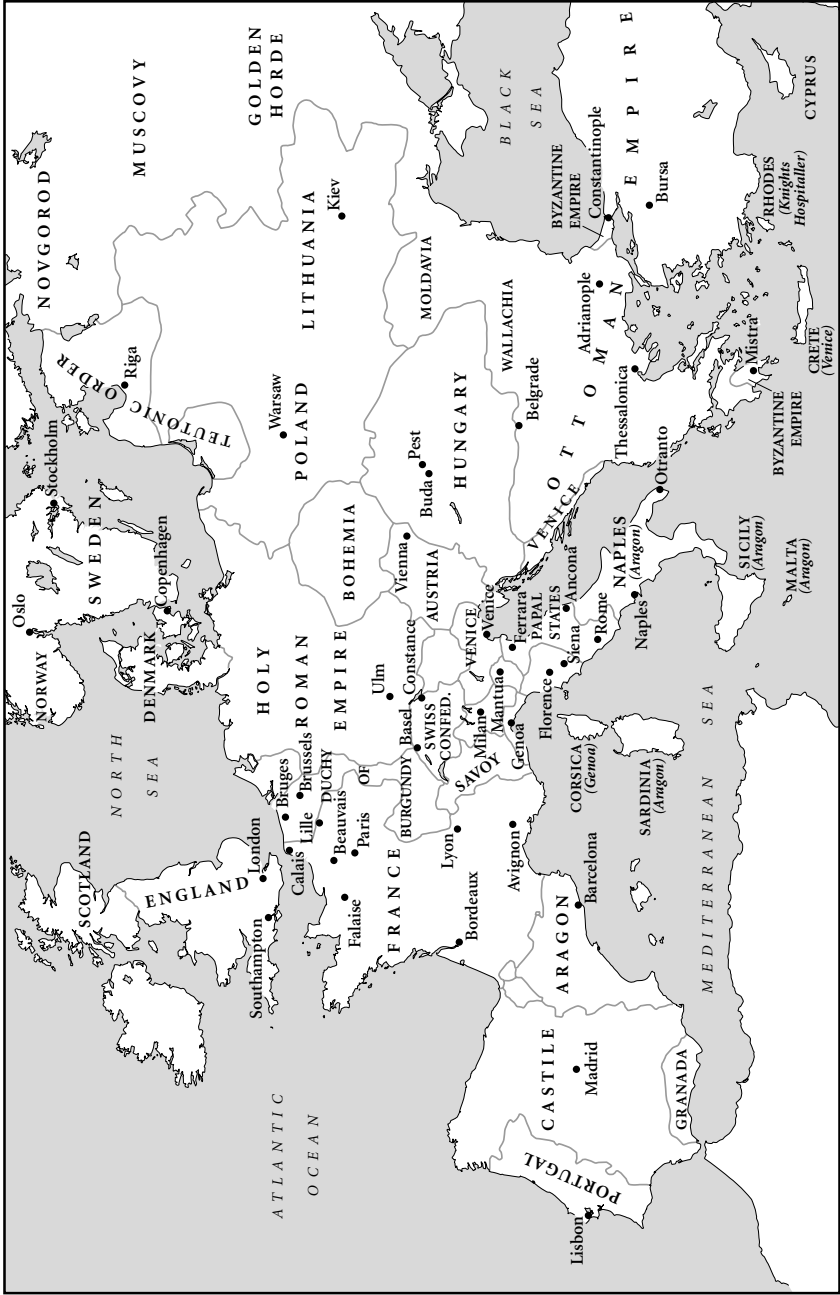
- 1415 Work begins on the Hexamilion wall
- 1421 Death of Mehmed I. Accession of Murad II
- 1422 Siege of Constantinople by Murad II
- 1423 Thessalonica handed over to Venice
- 1424 Peace treaty between Murad II and Byzantium
- 1425 Death of Manuel II. John VIII sole emperor
- 1428 Capture of Glarentza
- 1429 Constantine Palaiologos captures Patras
- 1430 Murad II captures Thessalonica
- 1437 Agreement for Church council to meet in Italy
- 1439 Union of the Churches proclaimed at Florence
- 1442 Attempted coup of Demetrius Palaiologos
- 1444 Defeat of the Crusade of Varna. Abdication of Murad II
- 1446 Return of Murad II.
- 1448 Death of John VIII.
- 1449 Arrival of Constantine XI in Constantinople.
- 1451 Death of Murad II; Accession of Mehmed II
- 1452 Construction of Rumeli Hisar
- 1453 Fall of Constantinople
- 1456 Siege of Belgrade
- 1458 Pius II becomes Pope
- 1459 Congress of Mantua
- 1460 Mehmed II conquers the Byzantine Morea
- 1464 Death of Pius II
- 1465 Death of Thomas Palaiologos
- c.1470 Death of Demetrius Palaiologos
- 1472 Death of Cardinal Bessarion
- 1481 Death of Mehmed II
- 1502 Death of Andreas Palaiologos



Map 1. The City of Constantinople

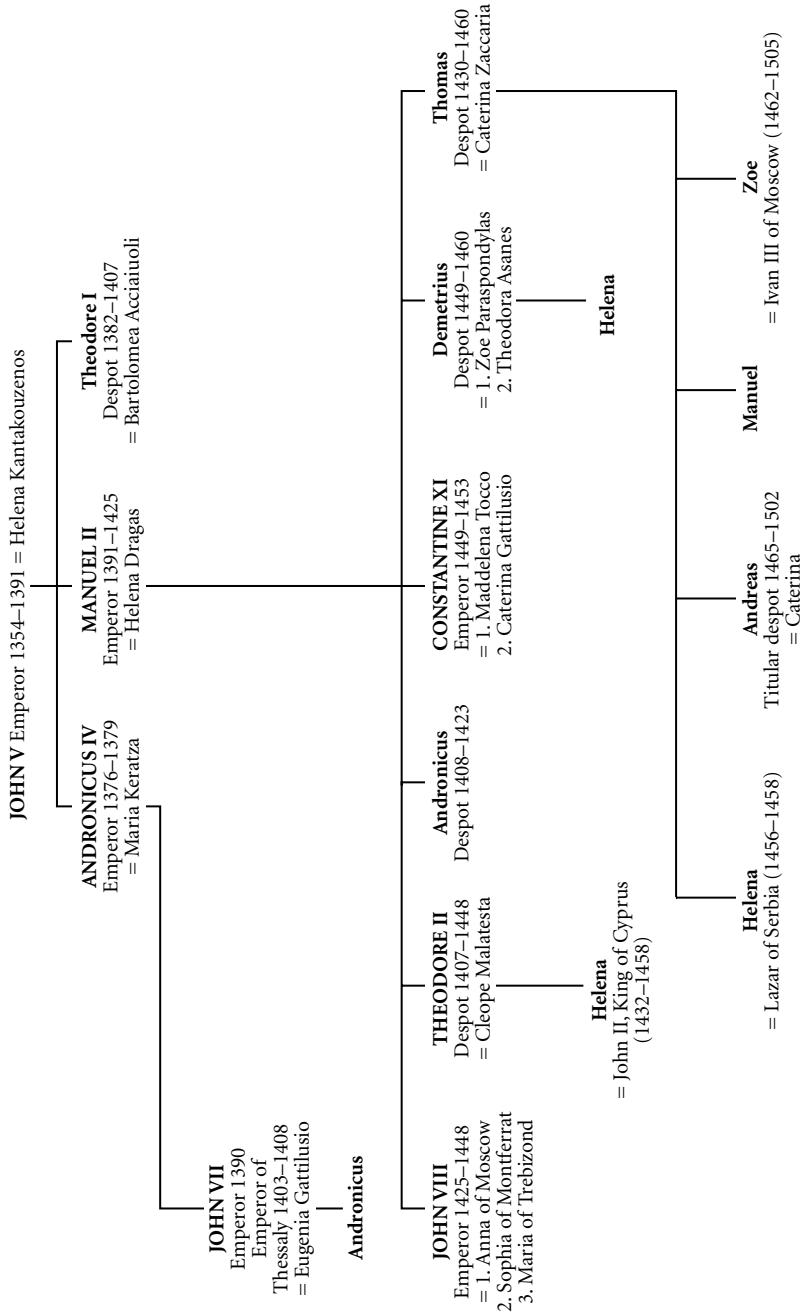


Map 2. The Byzantine Empire in 1403



Map 3. Europe in the Early Fifteenth Century

Genealogical Table of the Palaiologos Family (1354–1502)



Prologue

LATE IN THE night of 28 May 1453, Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos met with his commanders. For six weeks they had defended the walls of Constantinople, capital and one of the last outposts of the once-mighty empire of Byzantium, against the forces of the Ottoman sultan, Mehmed II. Against all the odds, they had held the line, heavily outnumbered and hopelessly outgunned by the sultan's huge cannon. Now, from their positions on the walls, they could see from the piles of scaling ladders and grappling hooks and from the frenzied activity in the besiegers' camp that Turkish preparations for the final assault were complete. At this critical juncture, the emperor sought to prepare his men for the battle ahead and to raise morale with a rousing speech:

Well, then, my brothers and fellow soldiers, be prepared for the morning. With the grace and strength granted to you by God and with help from the Holy Trinity, in which we have placed all our hope, let us force our enemy to depart from here in shame.

His commanders were deeply moved and declared that they were ready to die for Christ and their homeland. The emperor then proceeded

from one to another, asking them to forgive him if he had ever done them any wrong. They did the same, embracing one another and ‘no man, even if he were made of wood or stone, could have held back his tears’.¹ The defenders then returned to their positions to face the Ottoman attack but their heroic resistance was to be in vain. By the early hours of 29 May, the emperor and many of his commanders were dead and the Turks were pouring into the city, bringing the long history of Christian Constantinople to an end.

The story of the emperor’s last speech, the tearful embraces and the commanders’ eager declarations of their readiness to die for their country and faith has been told and retold over the centuries as an inspiring example of defiant heroism and self-sacrifice in the face of desperate odds. Sadly, it is almost certainly untrue. The chronicle that tells the tale was a forgery. It purports to be an eyewitness account of the siege by the Byzantine courtier and statesman George Sphrantzes (1401–c.1478), but it was, in fact, composed over a century later by a Greek archbishop living in Naples. Writing in the hope that the Holy Roman Emperor was soon to make war on the sultan and restore Constantinople to Christian rule, the author embellished and exaggerated the heroism of his Byzantine forebears, hoping to rouse his compatriots to a war against the common Muslim enemy. The many genuine contemporary accounts of the 1453 siege tell a very different story. Some mention that the emperor made a speech but they ascribe very different words to him and not one of them describes his emotional request for forgiveness or the mutual embraces and declarations. On the contrary, many first-hand accounts record that the Byzantines of Constantinople were decidedly unwilling to lay down their lives and that the most active defenders of the city were the Venetian and Genoese contingents. It was said that wealthy Byzantines hoarded their money rather than donate it to fund the defence while poorer ones demanded to be paid to participate.

Even among the Byzantine ruling classes, there was little interest in heroic last stands. While Constantine XI and some of his commanders undoubtedly did die on the walls of Constantinople fighting the victorious Turks to the last, not everyone was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. The emperor's younger brothers Demetrius and Thomas took much less dramatic exits from their strongholds in the Peloponnese seven years later. Demetrius tamely surrendered to the sultan and handed over the town of Mistra without a fight. Thomas did not even wait for the Turks to arrive but fled in a ship to the island of Corfu. Throughout the period 1372 to 1460, there were examples of outright Byzantine resistance to the Turks but they were relatively few and far between. For most of that time, the Byzantine emperor was a vassal and officially an ally of the Ottoman sultan. Rather than openly defy him, the emperor confined his opposition to covert intrigues, testing the bounds of the sultan's forbearance to the limit. Members of the ruling Palaiologos dynasty were much more likely to be fighting each other than the Turks, often with one or other party in the dispute calling on the sultan for help.

All this can make it difficult to write the story of the end of Byzantium. Some have taken a sympathetic line, notably Sir Steven Runciman (1903–2000) who narrated the 1453 siege and its aftermath in vivid and unforgettable style. An ardent philhellene, he made no secret of where his sympathies lay and retold the stories of the Pseudo-Sphrantzes chronicle uncritically. Others have been considerably less complimentary about the last Byzantines and especially about their ruling Palaiologos family. Some regarded their downfall as the inevitable outcome of cowardice and decadence. That scourge of all things Byzantine, Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), saw the rulers of Byzantium as having 'feebly sustained the name and majesty of the Caesars', and George Finlay (1799–1875) singled out the last Palaiologoi as 'the most worthless of princes'. An extreme view was voiced by the American

journalist Herbert Adams Gibbons (1880–1934), who denounced the Palaiologoi as ‘the most iniquitous family that has ever disgraced the kingly office’ and declared that the death of Constantine XI was ‘a striking illustration of the wrath of God upon the fourth generation of those who had hated and despised him’. To those who had been raised in the atmosphere of nineteenth-century nationalism, the apparent readiness of the Palaiologoi and their subjects to sacrifice the interests of their country for their own factional advantage was unforgivable.²

Recent commentators have taken a much more balanced line towards the last Byzantines with their readiness to surrender to the Turks and to indulge in petty dynastic squabbles. Some have argued that many Byzantines saw domination by a Muslim power as preferable to rule from the Catholic west because even if the Turks were infidels, they were nevertheless prepared to tolerate the Orthodox faith. Others have pointed out that economic issues and family ties rather than just personal ambition often lay behind struggles among the Palaiologoi. Yet a persistent element of criticism remains. The Byzantines have been accused of bigoted insularity which blinded them to the reality of the situation. It rendered them incapable of reaching a religious agreement to pave the way for help from western Europe, but at the same time they were not prepared to make sacrifices to resist the power of the Ottoman sultan.³

So the problem remains. Even today, there is a perception that the Byzantines were somehow wanting or cowardly in their response to the Ottoman threat. It is a view that arises partly from a persistent fascination with the Crusades. Popular interest has led to the publication of a rash of books on the subject, many of whose titles reflect an assumption that there was (and is) an inevitable and inherent conflict between Christianity and Islam and that medieval Christians and Muslims were in a constant state of antagonism and war. The same assumption underlies the belief of many Muslims today that they have been the perpetual

victims of Christian aggression across the centuries and the equally erroneous claim by westerners that Islam is some kind of uniquely violent religion. In that light, the readiness of some Byzantines to surrender tamely to Muslim domination seems like disloyalty to their own 'side' and somehow a deviation from what might normally be expected in the circumstances.

In reality, whatever the ideological or religious differences between Christian Byzantine Greeks and Muslim Turks, they were not necessarily natural enemies. On the contrary, on an everyday basis Greeks and Turks interacted quite peaceably for much of the first half of the fifteenth century. They were neighbours and trading partners and noticeably adopted aspects of each other's customs and language. Although they might disagree over whether Jesus Christ was God incarnate or simply a prophet, even in the Middle Ages that was seldom the kind of issue over which people went to war, the First Crusade (1095–9) perhaps being an obvious exception. What created the conflict were the policies pursued by those in power, whether ambitious Ottoman sultans who sought to promote themselves from leaders of a tribe to rulers of an empire, or meddling Byzantine emperors who believed that they could improve their precarious position by ill-judged stratagems. Indeed, political ambition rather than dogma lay behind most late medieval wars. Otherwise there would have been no Hundred Years War (1337–1453) between the Christian English and the equally Christian French and no clash between the Muslim Ottomans and their co-religionists and fellow Turks, the Karamanids.

Consequently, in the final phase of Byzantine history, the willingness on the part of some Byzantines to accommodate themselves to the Turks was not necessarily cowardice or lack of 'patriotism' but a realisation that the Turks were a permanent feature of the political landscape who were not going to go away. The deciding factors that the

PROLOGUE

Byzantines were responding to were not so much the claims of religion or country but the realities of international politics and diplomatic manoeuvrings, and the need to make a personal choice to secure their future and that of their families. The narrative that follows focuses on individuals, whether the emperors and princes who took the decisions or the aristocrats, intellectuals, craftsmen, artists and townspeople who were forced to make choices in response. Sometimes, it is true, they acted in accordance with what they considered to be a moral imperative which dictated resistance and self-sacrifice but more often they chose their perceived economic or political interests. It is these personal choices and experiences that together make up the story of the end of Byzantium.



Autumn in Constantinople

ON THE FEAST of St John Chrysostom, which was celebrated every year on 13 November, it was the custom of the Byzantine emperor to ride out with his courtiers from his palace of Blachernae which lay in the north-western corner of his capital city of Constantinople. They would progress down the long main street known as the Mese and across the city's main square, the Augousteion, where they would dismount and enter the looming bulk of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. There under the building's soaring dome and among the flickering candles and oil lamps that provided the only light on a dark evening late in the year, the emperor would hear the clergy of the cathedral sing the office of Vespers. When the service was at an end, he would retire to the residence of the patriarch, the supreme ecclesiastical dignity of the city, which stood next door to the cathedral. After spending the night as his guest, the emperor would return to Hagia Sophia the next morning to hear the liturgy once more before riding back to his palace.

One assumes that in November 1403 this routine or something similar was followed by Manuel II Palaiologos (r.1391–1425) who was then ruling the Byzantine empire, or Byzantium as it is also known. Throughout that autumn he would have been carrying out all the other ceremonial duties incumbent upon his office. On the feast of

St Demetrius on 26 October he would have attended a celebration in the monastery dedicated to the saint where many of the emperor's forebears of the Palaiologos family lay buried. To mark the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple on 21 November, he would have processed to the monastery of the Perivleptos in the south of the city.¹ These rituals must at times have been tedious, but one suspects that Manuel carried them off rather well. He was lucky enough to look the part perfectly. Although short of stature, the fifty-three-year-old emperor was powerfully built and well-proportioned. Like all male Byzantines over a certain age, he wore a long beard which, though now flecked with grey, was luxuriant and flowing. Above all, he had a dignified and kingly bearing which reminded Christians of the Three Kings and Muslims of the prophet Mohammed. It was said that if one saw Manuel and did not know that he was emperor, his rank would in any case be obvious.²

Manuel's stately mien stood him in good stead in another of the duties that he performed that autumn. On 28 October he played host to a delegation from King Henry III of Castile (r.1390–1406) in the palace of Blachernae. He received the Spanish envoys in his private chamber, seated on a raised, carpeted dais. At his side was the empress Helena, the daughter of a Serbian prince and Manuel's wife of twelve years. Also present were Manuel's three sons, John, Theodore and Andronicus, the eldest being eleven years old. The emperor spent considerable time with his Spanish guests, conversing amicably, and when they had retired to their lodging he sent over a stag that his huntsman had just killed to provide for their dinner. A few days later, on receiving a request from the envoys that they would like to see the holy relics for which Constantinople was famous, Manuel was only too happy to oblige. He entrusted the task to his son-in-law, a Genoese called Hilario Doria who was married to Manuel's illegitimate daughter Zampia. Doria led the Spaniards to the nearby church and monastery of St John in Petra where they were greatly impressed by the architecture and mosaics and where

the arm of St John the Baptist was duly produced. Unfortunately, the visitors were not able to see all the other relics because the emperor had gone hunting and had left the key to the box in which these treasures were kept with the empress. She for some reason had not sent it over to the church. That oversight was rectified on a second visit to the monastery a few days later when the visitors were treated to the sight of a portion of the Sop of Bread that Christ had given to Judas at the Last Supper and a small phial containing some of Christ's blood.³ All in all, Manuel had handled his Spanish visitors well, his combination of dignity and condescension making a very pleasing impression, and they went on their way well satisfied with their reception.

Yet for all Manuel's stateliness as he carried out his ceremonial and diplomatic duties, there was something of which he and all who saw him must have been acutely aware: it was almost a miracle that he was there at all. Not eighteen months before, Constantinople had been in the grip of a protracted siege and it had looked as if the city was doomed to fall into the hands of its enemies. Manuel himself was not even in his capital city but in a far-off foreign land from which it had looked very unlikely that he would ever return.

*

The enemies that had so nearly robbed Manuel II of his capital and empire were the Ottoman Turks. In 1403 they were still relative newcomers to the international stage. Fifty years before they had been just one among a number of originally nomadic Turkish tribes that had taken advantage of the weakness both of the Byzantine empire and the local Muslim power, the Seljuk Turks, to carve out small territories for themselves in western Asia Minor. During the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the Aydin Turks had established their emirate on the Aegean coast around the cities of Smyrna and Ephesus. The

Karaman Turks had captured the Seljuk capital of Konya in 1316 and made it the centre of an emirate that dominated much of southern Asia Minor. The Ottomans under their leaders Osman I (r.c.1299–1324) and his son Orhan I (r.1324–1362) had moved into the north-western region of Asia Minor and made their capital in the city of Bursa. All these newly arrived tribes were Muslim but they had extended a broad tolerance to the many Christians under their rule and thus ensured that there was very little opposition to their takeover.

In these early days, the Ottomans had by no means been the strongest or most prominent of these newcomers but they did have one solid advantage that was to lay the basis of their future greatness. Their territory faced the two narrow straits, the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, which separated Asia from Europe. Whereas the other Turkish emirates bordered either on each other or on the open sea, the Ottomans had the possibility of further expansion into Christian territory. During the mid-fourteenth century the possibility became a reality when the Ottomans secured a number of footholds on the European side of the Dardanelles, notably the port of Gallipoli which they seized in 1354. By the end of that year, they were in control of most of the north shore of the Sea of Marmara and were starting to probe into its Thracian hinterland. From this foothold, at some point during the 1360s, the Ottomans captured the Byzantine city of Adrianople. Strategically situated at the confluence of the rivers Marica and Tunca, this new acquisition provided access to the lands further to the west. It became the Ottomans' European base from which they raided into Macedonia and beyond and began to subdue the lands round about.⁴

Successful though the Ottomans had been in taking Gallipoli and Adrianople, this was no full-scale invasion of the Balkans but rather a tentative incursion. The Ottoman emir Murad I (r.1362–1389) was well aware of how tenuous his hold on the area was. His Turks were vastly outnumbered by the local Christian population and had no hope

of holding them down by force of arms. Murad therefore consolidated his gains in a remarkably astute way. No attempt was made to subjugate the entire Balkans or sweep away the existing Christian states. Instead, the Ottomans adopted a policy that strengthened their position in the Balkans by providing a source of income and enhancing the manpower at their disposal, an important consideration in the medieval period. Defeated local rulers were allowed to remain in place but they were reduced to the status of vassals who paid an annual tribute to the Ottoman emir and provided troops to serve in his armies. A victory over the Serbs at the battle of the Marica River in September 1371 gave Murad I the opportunity to subordinate their rulers in this way, and Serbian troops therefore became an important element in the Ottoman armies. The Bulgarians likewise accepted Ottoman overlordship around 1376. There was another way in which the Ottomans used the people they conquered to expand their manpower. It may have been Murad who instituted the *devshirme*, literally a tribute of children. The Ottomans would collect numbers of boys from Christian villages under their control and bring them up as Muslims. The most promising of them were then recruited into the janissaries, the elite corps of the Ottoman army. These policies meant that by the later fourteenth century the Ottomans could field very sizeable armies indeed, giving them the sheer weight of numbers to overwhelm their enemies, whether Christians in the Balkans or rival Turkish emirates in Asia Minor.⁵

As for the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople, Manuel II's father John V Palaiologos (r.1354–1391), he could only watch helplessly from the walls of his capital while the Ottomans relieved him first of Gallipoli, then Adrianople, and then of almost all his remaining lands in Thrace. The Byzantine empire had been in decline for years, divided by civil wars and robbed of territory and revenue by its neighbours so that it was now incapable of mounting any military challenge to Murad I. In the circumstances John V had to bow to the inevitable. Like the rulers of Serbia and

Bulgaria, he became a vassal of the Ottoman emir around 1372. He sent his son and future successor Manuel to Murad's court at Adrianople with a contingent of troops to serve in the Ottoman army. Thus the status quo was established. The Byzantine emperor had lost much of his territory in Europe but at least he could hold what he had left. The Ottoman emir made no attempt to move on Constantinople and could call upon his vassal the emperor to assist him when required. The fact that the emperor was a Christian and the emir a Muslim was irrelevant. The arrangement simply reflected the political realities of the day.⁶

Yet although John V's submission to Murad had probably saved Constantinople from the prospect of an Ottoman attack at that time, it was not well received by all his subjects. To accept the emir's overlordship seemed to some to be like supping with the Devil, for they feared that the power of the Ottomans in the Balkans would grow if it were left unchallenged. Those who held this view found a leader in John V's son Manuel. In 1382, with youthful bravado, Manuel left Constantinople with a band of loyal followers and took himself off west to Thessalonica, the second city of the Byzantine empire that had so far managed to avoid the fate of Gallipoli and Adrianople. There he led a spirited resistance to Ottoman rule, defying both emperor and emir and aiming to restore Byzantine authority over Macedonia and Thessaly. He enjoyed some initial success and volunteers poured into Thessalonica to support his brave stand.

Unfortunately, Manuel soon discovered the drawbacks of confrontation. Murad could hardly allow such defiance to go unpunished and he subjected Thessalonica to a blockade. Although supplies could still be brought in by sea, the blockade soon began to bite and food started to run low. As months of rigours and privations went by, some citizens of Thessalonica came to think that it would be better to capitulate than continue a fruitless resistance. After five years of siege, they finally made it clear to Manuel that he was not wanted. Dejectedly, he left the

city in April 1387, and three days later the citizens opened their gates voluntarily to Murad's troops. Unable to return to Constantinople and to the wrath of his father, Manuel took refuge first on the island of Lesbos and then on Tenedos, but in the end he had to make his way to Bursa to make his peace with Murad. According to one account, the emir received him graciously but gave him a friendly warning:

Son of the Emperor, I know well that you acted in some justice in occupying the lands which are mine now but which used to be yours. What you did you did rightfully and I forgive you for the present. But be careful not to be found acting against me and my authority in this way again. I and the God who looks after me have shown that you acted foolishly. Thus if you want things to go well, face the fact that we control European affairs.

Manuel then returned to Constantinople, armed with a letter from Murad asking John V to forgive and receive his son, which the emperor duly did. There could be no clearer lesson of the futility of resistance, and Manuel henceforth toed his father's line and accepted Ottoman overlordship.⁷

*

Just as the status quo could be challenged from the Byzantine side, so it could be from the Ottoman camp. Two years after Manuel's submission, that was exactly what happened. The change of policy was the outcome of a dramatic series of events that took place in the year 1389. The Serbs revolted against their Ottoman overlords and refused to pay further tribute. Murad I took up the challenge and marched on Serbia with his army. The subsequent battle of Kosovo was an Ottoman victory, but Murad did not live to see it for he had been assassinated in

his tent by a Serbian spy shortly before the battle began. As even a Christian chronicler had to admit: 'His death was unworthy of a king who had fought for so many years and done great deeds.'⁸

Murad's son and successor, Bayezid I (r.1389–1402), was a man of a very different stamp. Aggressive and impetuous where his father had been prudent and cautious, he had earned himself the sobriquet of 'Yildirim', or Thunderbolt, on account of the speed with which he could act and move his troops. Bayezid decided that the time had come to dispense with half measures. Whereas his father had contented himself with the humble title of emir, Bayezid seems to have styled himself 'sultan' to reflect the formidable power that the Ottomans had now become. Almost immediately, the new sultan abandoned the policy of allowing petty Christian rulers to survive as Ottoman vassals. In 1393 his army invaded Bulgaria and captured its capital of Trnovo. This time the country was annexed outright, reduced to the status of a province with a governor appointed by the sultan. It was an ominous precedent for the treatment that Bayezid's other vassals could expect.

When it came to the Byzantines, Bayezid was not ready to attack Constantinople directly but he started by insisting on the letter of the vassaldom imposed by his father. In 1390 he saw to it that John V sent his son Manuel to accompany the Ottoman army with a hundred soldiers on an expedition to Asia Minor, where Bayezid was engaged in subjugating various small Turkish emirates. Ironically, as part of his duties, Manuel was compelled to participate in the storming of Philadelphia, a Byzantine city in southern Asia Minor that had held out against the Ottomans for years. It was while he was reluctantly engaged on this expedition, in the spring of 1391, that news reached Manuel of the death of his father. He had to leave the Ottoman camp at Bursa to ride post-haste to Constantinople to claim the throne. After securing matters in the capital, he returned to Bayezid's army in June to complete his military service.⁹

The experience of having to fight on the Ottoman side was a bitter one for the new emperor, as he candidly admitted in letters written to a friend from the Turkish camp during the winter of 1391–2:

Obviously, it is not easy to bear all this, not to mention the scarcity of supplies, the severity of the winter and the sickness which has struck down many of our men, and which, as you can understand, has greatly depressed me.

One discerns, too, under the guarded language, a deep personal aversion to Bayezid himself, who appears to have rubbed salt into the wound by insisting that his unwilling Byzantine comrades-in-arms join him for his nocturnal carousals:

For already I can all but make out the messengers inviting us to go off to the ruler. I suppose he again wants to drink a few toasts before dinner and to force us to fill ourselves with wine from his varied collection and golden bowls and cups. He thinks that these will assuage the depression caused by what we have been writing about while, even if I were in good spirits, they would only fill me with sadness.¹⁰

Only when the campaign finally ended was Manuel able to return to his capital and to celebrate his long-delayed coronation on 11 February 1392.

Unpleasant though Manuel's Asia Minor experience had been, it turned out to be just the beginning, as Bayezid continued to play cat and mouse with his hapless vassal. Late in 1393 a summons arrived from the sultan inviting the emperor to wait upon him at the town of Serres in Macedonia. Feeling it prudent to comply Manuel set out, but on arriving he was horrified to discover that he was not the only one to have received the invitation. A number of other Christian rulers were there too, including Stefan Lazarevich, Despot of Serbia (r.1402–1427)

and Manuel's own younger brother, Theodore, the ruler of the Byzantine Peloponnese. Not unreasonably, they surmised that Bayezid had summoned them with a view to murdering them all and they set about making their wills. Bayezid had, in fact, received various complaints from the subjects of his guests and used these as a pretext for terrorising them and extorting concessions.¹¹

By the time Manuel was finally allowed to leave Serres, he had probably come to the conclusion that it was no longer possible to avoid all-out war with Bayezid. Accordingly, he closed the gates of Constantinople and awaited the onslaught. True to his name, Bayezid the Thunderbolt did not dally. During September 1394 he moved an army up to Constantinople's Theodosian or 'Land Walls' and sent a message advising the emperor to 'Shut the gates of the city and reign within. Everything outside the city is mine.' Arrogant and rash though he was, Bayezid was also a very competent soldier and he had no intention of risking a frontal assault on Constantinople's formidable defences. He adopted a more intelligent approach:

He did not set up siege engines to demolish the battlements and walls, nor did he utilize any other kind of military engine. He did not order his lightly armed troops to make skirmishes. He employed instead more than ten thousand men around the city to guard the exits so that nothing could either leave or enter. There was, therefore, a terrible dearth of grain, wine, oil, and other provisions within the city. There was no bread or any cooked food because of the lack of wood . . .¹²

To make the blockade really effective, it would have to be enforced by sea as well as by land. Here the Ottomans had always been at a disadvantage, for their origins as a pastoral people from the steppes meant they had little in the way of a seafaring tradition. Bayezid had, however, established a shipyard and arsenal at Gallipoli with room for some forty

vessels and so now had a small fleet at his disposal. This force could not stop access to Constantinople by sea altogether, and Venetian and Genoese merchant vessels did still succeed in reaching the Golden Horn, Constantinople's harbour. But the Turkish fleet did limit the number of ships getting through and as a result food prices soared, leaving the poorer citizens facing the prospect of starvation. To make matters worse, plague broke out during the summer months and the bodies of victims could often be seen lying in the streets. Many of the inhabitants of Constantinople saw no hope in remaining and fled the city, letting themselves down by ropes from the Land Walls by night or sailing away in small boats. Others started to suggest that the only sensible course was to surrender the city to the sultan. For his part, Bayezid was prepared to sit it out for as long as it took to bring the city to its knees. Weeks turned to months and months to years, and the siege went on remorselessly.¹³

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Manuel II now found himself blockaded in Constantinople in much the same way as he had been in Thessalonica in 1383–7. There was no possibility that he could muster the resources to defeat the Ottomans militarily, and once again there was the danger that the citizens of the beleaguered city would grow tired of the privations and open the gates to the enemy. The only hope for salvation lay in some outside power intervening and raising the siege. Since Constantinople was a significant Christian city under attack from Muslims, Manuel and his advisers decided to appeal to Christian powers to come to its aid. The obvious target for such an appeal was Russia. The Russians, like the Byzantines, were Orthodox Christians, but unlike the Orthodox Serbs and Bulgarians they were not subject to Ottoman domination. Under its ruler Vasilii I (r.1389–1425), the grand duchy of Moscow had been growing in power and influence and Vasilii

had recently shown himself to be sympathetic by sending a gift of money to help embattled Constantinople. So in 1400, at the height of Bayezid's siege, a Byzantine embassy was despatched to Moscow led by Manuel II's cousin, Theodore Palaiologos Kantakouzenos, to ask for more aid. Later Manuel was to arrange a marriage alliance between his eldest son John and Vasilius's daughter Anna. Sadly, in spite of these contacts, when it came to providing direct military help for Constantinople, Moscow was of little help. It had a Muslim enemy every bit as powerful as the Ottomans on its own doorstep, the Golden Horde which dominated much of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan and the Caucasus. The grand duke of Moscow was in much the same state of vassaldom as the Byzantine emperor had been to the Ottoman sultan, obliged to pay an annual tribute to the khan of the Golden Horde.¹⁴

Since the Christians to the north were unable to provide much help, Manuel II was compelled to look to the west, to the people that the Byzantines called 'Latins'. This term covered a multitude of peoples and countries, for in the late fourteenth century the map of western Europe was an intricate patchwork consisting of some large, centralised kingdoms, along with a myriad of small lordships and city states. The largest unit was the extensive if unwieldy Holy Roman Empire comprising modern Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic. The smallest were the city states of Italy, such as the republic of Siena or the duchy of Ferrara which controlled only a small area around the central town. Complicated though the map of Europe was, the states of the west were a force to be reckoned with. Some of them, such as the kingdoms of France, England and Hungary, were militarily very powerful. Others, such as the city states of Italy, had become extremely wealthy through trade, notably Florence, Milan, Venice and Genoa. A few, such as the duchy of Burgundy, were both wealthy and powerful. All of them, with the exception of the emirate of Granada in the south of Spain, were predominantly Christian.

Here could be found the resources and muscle to take on the Ottomans and drive them out of Europe, and there was good reason to hope that those resources might be deployed to exactly that end. There was a strong tradition in medieval Europe that one of the highest duties of a fit, male, solvent Christian was that of waging war against the infidel, the so-called Crusade. The First Crusade had been launched by the Pope in 1095 with a view to recovering Jerusalem from the Muslims, which it successfully did. By 1394 the Holy City had long since been lost again, but the crusading ethos remained very much alive and its targets had changed as the frontiers of Islam had pushed forward. In 1344 a crusade fleet had captured the port of Smyrna on the coast of Asia Minor from the Aydin Turks, and in 1366 another expedition led by Count Amadeo of Savoy had seized Gallipoli from the Ottomans and had handed it back to the Byzantine emperor. If these relatively small expeditions could achieve so much, then if a general crusade were to be launched against the Ottomans, surely Constantinople could be saved.

There was, however, an impediment to calling on the Latins for help. A crusade could only be launched by the Pope. Only he could confer the spiritual reward that went with it, the so-called indulgence promised that whoever took part in the crusade would have their sins remitted and would therefore spend less or no time in Purgatory before being admitted to Paradise. Unfortunately, Byzantine relations with the Papacy had been strained for some time. Whereas the Latin countries, including Hungary, were Catholic and regarded the Pope in Rome as the head of and supreme authority in the Church, the Byzantines, along with the Serbs, Bulgarians and Russians, were Orthodox. Since the eleventh century the two Churches, Orthodox and Catholic, had been in schism. There were two main issues that had brought about the rift. One was a matter of ecclesiastical authority. The Byzantines would not accept the claim of the Pope to be the head of the entire Church.

Rather, they saw supreme authority as being vested in an ecumenical council in which representatives from the entire Church took part. The other issue was a matter of theology. The Byzantines objected to the addition of the word *Filioque* ('and from the Son') to the Latin version of the Creed and even more to western suggestions that they should adopt it themselves. The Creed as originally formulated in both Latin and Greek by the ecumenical councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 had contained no such word, and the Byzantines therefore regarded it as heretical.

Given this background, it was likely that any request to the Pope that he should preach a crusade for the relief of Constantinople would meet with the response that the schism must first be healed. Manuel II's father John V, who had also hoped for western help against the Ottomans, had attempted to get round the difficulty. In 1369 he had travelled to Rome and announced his personal conversion to Catholicism and acceptance of papal authority. This act in no way ended the schism, as John was speaking only for himself and not the entire Byzantine Church and people, but it was a step in the right direction and the Pope was prepared to meet him halfway. Letters were duly despatched from the papal court to the rulers of western Christendom urging them to assist John and his people against the Turks, regardless of whether they were schismatics or not.¹⁵ Sadly, this major diplomatic coup was not matched by any willingness among western powers to respond to the call and no expedition set out against the Ottomans. It was when John returned to Constantinople from Rome empty-handed that he realised he had no choice but to become a vassal of the Ottoman emir.

The discouraging outcome of his father's initiative might have made Manuel II think twice before renewing the appeal to the west, but with Bayezid's army outside the walls of Constantinople there did not seem to be any alternative. Hoping to find some more effective way to induce western Christians to come to his aid, Manuel learned from his father's

experience. He took the decision not to make any further approach to the Pope or to discuss the schism and any possible resolution of it. Far better to use the prospect of reunion of the Churches as a way of scaring Bayezid, he reasoned, than get enmeshed in the theological debates that would be needed to resolve the dispute.¹⁶ Instead, he decided to appeal directly to the rulers of western European kingdoms, the people who would actually organise and lead the crusade. It was their failure to respond that had doomed the Pope's appeal in the aftermath of the 1369 visit. If they could be roused to action now, the Byzantines could capitalise on the Pope's willingness to overlook the schism for the time being.

So in May 1395 a Byzantine ambassador appeared at Lyon with letters from the emperor for the king of France, Charles VI (r.1380–1422). The envoy seems to have been singularly ill-suited for the task as he was able to speak only Greek, leading to some communication difficulties with his hosts. Nevertheless, a start had been made and direct contact had been established with one of the most powerful rulers in western Christendom. More envoys followed, notably to Venice and to Hungary, the strongest Christian naval and military powers in the Aegean and the Balkans respectively. Manuel's appeal was well received. News of Bayezid's activities had in any case already reached the west by other channels and the situation was sufficiently alarming to spur the preparation of an expedition to the east. After all, if Bayezid were to succeed in conquering Constantinople, what was there to stop him marching on Hungary or even Italy? Indeed it was rumoured that the sultan was openly boasting that he would soon be feeding his horses on the altar of St Peter's basilica and then marching to Paris to pay a visit to the king of France. Even if Manuel II had not made his appeal, it is likely that the west would have taken action anyway.¹⁷

In the summer of 1396 word came to Constantinople that a joint French, Burgundian and Hungarian army was crossing the River Danube and marching to the relief of the city. Led by Sigismund, king of Hungary

(r.1387–1437) and future Holy Roman Emperor, and John of Nevers, the son of the duke of Burgundy, the force numbered some 15,000 men and included a large contingent of the heavily armoured knights for which France was famous. Undismayed by the size of the army ranged against him, Bayezid now earned his sobriquet and showed what a great soldier he was. Breaking off his blockade, he marched his forces north from Constantinople with incredible speed. He confronted the Christian army at Nicopolis in Bulgaria on 25 September and after a hard-fought battle completely destroyed it. Many of the French knights, whose rash charge uphill against the Ottoman positions had helped to deliver Bayezid's victory, were killed or captured, with John of Nevers among the prisoners. Sigismund had to make his getaway by ship down the Danube. The western threat having been comprehensively neutralised, Bayezid returned to resume the blockade of Constantinople. Manuel was in despair, complaining that it seemed as if he had just witnessed 'the road of the impious smoothed for their progress'.¹⁸ It must have seemed that any prospect of further western help was now very remote.

All was not lost, however, for western Christians were well aware of the danger that Bayezid presented. As Sigismund of Hungary wrote shortly after the Nicopolis debacle, the loss of Constantinople would be 'an excessive damage to all Christendom', not just to the Byzantine emperor. Manuel made the same point in a letter to the king of France the following year, warning of 'how great an injury would befall Christendom' were the city to fall.¹⁹ Consequently, the rulers of western Europe did not turn their backs on the emperor in his plight. In the late summer of 1399 a small but welcome addition to the defences of Constantinople arrived in the form of 1,200 men sent by Charles VI of France, whose fleet of six ships had slipped through Bayezid's blockade and arrived safely in the Golden Horn. The commander of the expedition, the veteran soldier Marshal Boucicaut, lost no time in persuading Manuel II that further military help from the west might materialise if

he made another appeal to the king of France and other Christian monarchs. To make the appeal even more effective, Manuel should go in person. The emperor took this advice. In December 1399 he sailed from Constantinople with Boucicaut, taking his family with him and entrusting the defence of the capital to his nephew John. He left his wife and children at Monemvasia in the Peloponnese under the protection of his younger brother Theodore and then sailed for Italy. In June 1400 he arrived in Paris and by Christmas he was in England, the guest of King Henry IV (1399–1413). Early in 1401 he returned to France and from there he contacted the rulers of Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Aragon, Castile and Navarre in the hope of enlisting their support.

On one level, Manuel's visit to the west was a great success. Wherever the emperor went, he was enthusiastically welcomed. At Padua he was received to the sound of music and rejoicing, and at Genoa with multi-coloured banners. He entered Paris in June 1400 accompanied by King Charles VI amidst great pomp, and in London a tournament and a masquerade were laid on for his entertainment. There was great sympathy for the predicament that Manuel found himself in, one Welsh observer commenting on 'how sad it was that this great Christian leader from the remote east had been driven by the power of the infidel to visit distant islands in the west in order to seek help against them'.²⁰ The schism was scarcely mentioned. There were a few murmurings in 1401 when Manuel attended Mass with the king of France in the church of the monastery of St Denis near Paris. Some people had thought that his presence as a schismatic was improper. In general, however, the response to Manuel's visit was a positive one. Since 1378 the papacy had been divided by a schism with one pope residing in Rome and another in Avignon, in southern France, but they both now took a similar stance. Pope Boniface IX (1389–1404), preached a crusade, promising indulgences for all who helped Manuel against his enemy 'Baisetus'. Not to be outdone, his rival in Avignon, Benedict XIII (r.1394–1409) did the

same. Throughout Europe collecting boxes were placed in churches so that people could donate money to help pay for the defence of Constantinople. Many did so, three thousand marks being collected in England and five hundred gold ducats in Siena.²¹

At first Manuel hoped that this sympathetic reception would translate itself into tangible military assistance for Constantinople. Early in 1401 he wrote that Henry IV of England 'is providing us with military assistance, with soldiers, archers, money and ships'. That hope proved illusory as the emperor discovered the second great impediment to western help for Constantinople, the endemic disunity and instability of the Catholic world. However impressive many of its great powers looked to an outsider, they often suffered from chronic internal instability. Manuel must have known when he arrived in England in December 1400, for example, that his host Henry IV was a usurper who had overthrown and murdered his predecessor Richard II only the previous year. Henry's hold on the throne was still very tenuous, so it was unlikely that he would be able to spare resources to send to Constantinople. The kingdoms of the west were also riven by long-term rivalries with each other. England and France were at peace during the time of Manuel II's visit, but in 1413 they resumed their long-running conflict known as the Hundred Years War over the claim of the king of England to the French Crown. The kingdom of Hungary, the closest Catholic power to Constantinople, was involved in a similar dynastic quarrel, the Crown being disputed between King Ladislas of Naples (r.1386–1414) and Sigismund of Hungary. The Italian city states of Venice and Genoa, whose naval support was essential for the survival of Constantinople, were bitter commercial rivals and their hostility had often exploded into armed confrontation in the past. Nor was the papacy in any position to impose unity or provide moral leadership, given the ongoing papal schism between Rome and Avignon. Sultan Bayezid was well aware of all this. He openly encouraged Ladislas of Naples in his claim to the Hungarian

Crown and wryly commented that 'As long as the Christians have two popes, I am not afraid to fight them; when they have only one, I shall be obliged to make peace with them.'²²

If Manuel had not been aware of these matters before his visit, he certainly found out about them now. One gets the impression that by the summer of 1401 he was beginning to become disillusioned and to realise that he was not going to achieve what he had set out to do. Perhaps he had given up hope that Constantinople could be saved at all. He certainly made no haste to return to his capital, lingering on in Paris as the guest of the French king in the Louvre palace. There he occupied himself by writing, turning out a learned theological discourse on the Procession of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps not too overburdened with work, he even found time to pen a description of a springtime scene on a tapestry that hung on the wall of the palace:

The blossom is out, and a clear light spreads softly over all. The leaves rustle sweetly, and the grass seems to ripple, bending before the breeze that stirs it with its lovely touch. What a delightful scene!²³

The summer of 1402 came and Manuel was still in Paris. He may well have expected to receive news any day that Constantinople had finally fallen to Bayezid, in which case he could remain in France in comfortable retirement for the rest of his days. Then one day news did arrive, but it was not what Manuel had expected. The siege was over. Bayezid's army had been crushed and the sultan himself was a prisoner. Constantinople was saved.

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Characteristically, Bayezid had over-reached himself. He had not waited until he had dealt with Constantinople and the Christians of the Balkans

before attacking the Muslims of Asia Minor and attempting to subjugate the other Turkish emirates. In 1397 he had invaded the emirate of Karaman in the south and occupied Konya, its capital. The following year he moved north and attacked Sivas, expelling its emir and annexing his lands. What the sultan had not taken into account was that the emir of Sivas had a powerful protector. He was a vassal of the mighty lord of Samarkand, Timur (r.1370–1405). A military genius whose achievements included the conquest of Persia and the sack of Delhi in 1398, Timur regarded Bayezid's activities as deliberate provocation. He responded by marching on Sivas, taking the place and subjecting it to a brutal sack. As tension mounted, the Ottoman sultan had ample opportunity to draw back but he chose to take the path of direct confrontation. The showdown came at Ankara on 28 July 1402. Timur took the precaution of diverting the local river before the battle, leaving Bayezid's troops without water in the fierce summer sun. Not surprisingly, Timur's well-watered troops won the day and Bayezid fled the field to take refuge in the nearby mountains. He did not get far since Timur's troops combed the area and brought him back a prisoner.

At a stroke, Ottoman power collapsed. Deprived of their leader, the survivors of the Ankara disaster could put up no resistance and Timur's army pushed forward unopposed into western Asia Minor. Their first target was the Ottoman capital of Bursa, which they captured and sacked on 3 August. They then moved against the port of Smyrna, which was still in the hands of the Christian Knights of St John after its capture during the crusade of 1344. For some time the knights put up a desperate defence against Timur's Mongol troops but in the end they too succumbed and those among the defenders who did not escape by sea were massacred, their heads being struck off and piled up into a pyramid. The victorious army then proceeded to devastate the surrounding countryside with such efficiency that by the time they moved on 'not even the bark of a dog nor the cackle of a hen nor the

cry of a child was any longer heard'. To be fair, Timur was not intent only on destruction and revenge during his stay in Asia Minor. The best way to prevent a resurgence of Ottoman power was to strengthen its rivals, so Timur went about restoring to Ottoman lands all the Turkish emirs that Bayezid had ousted. The emir of Karaman was reinstated in Konya and even given additional territory. Smyrna was returned to the emir of Aydin from whose predecessor it had been taken by the crusaders in 1344. The hapless Bayezid had to watch passively while his empire was dismembered in this way. According to legend, he accompanied Timur's army on its campaign in Asia Minor, carried around in a cage. Not surprisingly, his health gave way and on 9 March 1403 the redoubtable sultan died, still a prisoner of his conqueror.²⁴

For the Byzantines in Constantinople, the news of Bayezid's downfall meant that the siege which had been lifted when the sultan had marched off to do battle with Timur would not now be resumed. There was nothing further for Manuel II to do in Paris and in the autumn of 1402 he set out for home, finally arriving in Constantinople in June the following year. Not surprisingly, the emperor was exultant at the downfall of his enemy who had, he claimed, now 'paid at once for all his wrongdoings from the beginning'. When Christmas came, Manuel could celebrate it not at a foreign court, as he had done for several years, but in his own capital. The custom was that on Christmas Eve, the emperor would leave his private apartments in the palace of Blachernae and process to its great dining hall, or Triklinos. He was accompanied by a choir who sang the traditional acclamations, wishing the emperor many years of life and health. When he reached the Triklinos, the emperor would find an array of religious icons laid out on a screen before him and these he would reverently kiss, particularly the one which depicted the Nativity. Not so long before, it had seemed unlikely, if not impossible, that Manuel would participate in this ceremony ever again. That he was doing so once more in his own palace must have been a moment to savour.²⁵



The Shadow Empire

THE DRAMATIC DOWNFALL of Bayezid in the summer of 1402 had certainly saved Constantinople from the immediate threat of starvation and surrender, but that did not mean the city was safe. Although Bayezid had been captured by Timur, his numerous sons had escaped from the catastrophe at Ankara. One of them, Suleyman, crossed the Dardanelles to Gallipoli a few weeks later on a Genoese ship and once he was in Adrianople he succeeded in having himself recognised as the rightful ruler of his father's dominions in the Balkans. Timur, who had no fleet at his disposal, could not follow him there. Consequently, there was now once more an Ottoman ruler in the Balkans within striking distance of the Byzantine capital.¹

As it turned out, Suleyman was no threat to Constantinople. With half the Ottoman empire occupied by Timur's troops and with his own brothers likely to challenge him for their father's inheritance, Suleyman needed to have his hands free. He hastened to come to terms with the Byzantines and the other Christian powers in the area. Early in 1403 he made contact with Manuel II's nephew John, who was still acting as ruler in Constantinople in the emperor's absence, and the two princes concluded a treaty of peace and friendship. In his eagerness to avoid any entanglements, Suleyman made a number of very generous concessions.

The annual tribute in gold that the emperor had been obliged to pay to the sultan was dropped. The immediate hinterland of Constantinople, which had been occupied by Bayezid during the siege, was restored to Byzantine rule and Thessalonica, which had opened its gates to Murad I in 1387, was returned along with the territories around it. Suleyman even went so far as to refer to the Byzantine emperor in the treaty as his father, symbolically reversing the former relationship of lord and vassal. So favourable were the terms that some in the Ottoman camp grumbled that Suleyman had gone too far. As far as the Byzantines were concerned, the treaty gave them a future when only a few months before it had looked as if there was none, and five months after it was signed their emperor came home to rule over them once more.²

The Byzantine empire that emerged from Bayezid's siege after 1403 was a curious institution, full of contrasts and contradictions. It retained the political theory of a universal Christian empire and yet the territory that it physically controlled was tiny. Its capital city was filled with monumental reminders of past wealth and greatness, but most of the people who lived there, including the emperor himself, were desperately poor. At the same time, its very weakness was contradicted by events. It seemed so vulnerable that it could scarcely survive and yet it was able to cling on to existence for another half a century. Even the poverty of most of its inhabitants was in contrast to the vast fortunes that were being made by a tiny coterie.

As far as the political theory went, Manuel II had an august title to go with his kingly appearance. He signed himself as 'Emperor and Autocrat of the Romans' in his native Greek in red or purple ink on treaties and imperial letters, just as his predecessors had. The title encapsulated the Byzantine political theory that the emperor who ruled in Constantinople was the direct successor of the first Roman emperor, Augustus (r.31B.C.–A.D.14), whose reign had coincided with the birth of Christ. It was believed, therefore, that the Byzantine emperor had a

special place among Christian monarchs and that ideally his rule should encompass the whole Christian world as it had done under the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great (r.306–337). As the patriarch of Constantinople put it in around 1393, Manuel II was ‘Emperor and Autocrat of the Romans, that is, of all Christians’.³

Manuel had a capital to match his title. Constantinople was one of the great cities of the medieval world, known to its inhabitants as ‘the Queen of Cities’. It was a very large metropolis by late medieval standards. One visitor compared the experience of finding his way around it to being in a great forest.⁴ Its walls enclosed an area of almost 30,000 hectares (115 square miles) at a time when those of Florence, one of the largest and most prosperous cities of western Europe, enclosed only 630 hectares. Moreover, unlike many western medieval cities, the centre of Constantinople was not a clutter of winding streets and closely packed houses but a planned urban environment, the legacy of its founder, Constantine, who had laid it out as a fitting capital for the eastern half of the Roman empire. It had a wide main street, the Mese, that led from the Land Walls to the main square, the Augousteion. There were several other large public squares, such as the Forum of Theodosius and the Forum of Constantine, both dominated by tall columns at their centre. There were two sprawling palaces, that of Blachernae near the Land Walls and the Great Palace which adjoined the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. Constantinople also boasted a stadium, the Hippodrome, which could seat 100,000 people and had in happier times been the venue for chariot races. As befitted such an overtly Christian culture, Constantinople had literally hundreds of churches and monasteries. Their domes were a striking feature of the skyline and many were decorated on the inside with sumptuous mosaics and frescoes.

The physical territory actually controlled by the Byzantine emperor in 1403, on the other hand, fell considerably short of the pretensions of his title and the size of his capital. By Manuel II’s day Constantinople was

rather like Vienna after the First World War, a grand imperial capital that was the centre of only a tiny territory which would be better described as a number of pockets of land rather than an empire. Constantinople itself was one of those pockets. West of its gates, the emperor controlled the land that extended some 80 kilometres (50 miles) as far as Vizye and the port of Selymbria. To the north he held a narrow strip that extended up the Black Sea coast to Mesembria and possibly as far as Varna. That was as far as his authority went and the rest of his territory was separated from the capital either by the sea or by lands controlled by somebody else. Thessalonica, the empire's second city, lay some 513 kilometres (319 miles) to the west, at the head of the Thermaic Gulf with Ottoman territory in between. Like Constantinople, Thessalonica was a sizeable town whose walls extended for some 8 kilometres (5 miles). Built on land that sloped down to the sea, it was divided into an upper and lower city, with most of its population being concentrated in the latter around the deep harbour which could accommodate the largest merchant ships. But like Constantinople again, it was a top-heavy city with a rather modest hinterland. To the west and south it extended in a narrow band for a short way down the coast of Thessaly. On the eastern side it encompassed the three rocky promontories known as Chalkidiki. On the furthestmost of these was Mount Athos, or the Holy Mountain, which was entirely given over to monks and hermits who lived lives of prayer and abstinence in some fifty or sixty monasteries. Beyond that was territory controlled by the Ottoman Turks.

Another pocket of territory lay some way to the south. The Byzantine emperor possessed about a third of the Peloponnese, also known as the Morea, the peninsula at the far south of Greece. The main town of this Byzantine enclave was Mistra, which was sited on the slopes of a mountain, Taygetos, and so commanded wide views of the vale of Sparta far below. To the south on the coast lay Monemvasia and to the north the fortified town of Mouchli, which more or less

marked the boundary of Byzantine rule. Lastly, the Byzantine emperor was also officially the ruler of some islands in the northern Aegean. Of these, the largest and the most important was Limnos which, by virtue of its position, controlled the sea route between Constantinople and Thessalonica. The emperor also owned nearby Thasos and Imbros.⁵

That was the sum total of the empire over which Manuel II ruled in 1403 and yet even within that small area he did not enjoy undisputed authority. The scattered nature of his domain meant that communications were difficult and his authority over some parts was decidedly shadowy. The island of Thasos, for example, appears sometimes to have neglected its allegiance to the emperor in Constantinople and to have been under the jurisdiction of the rulers of neighbouring islands. During the previous century, as the empire had become increasingly fragmented, a method of government had been evolved to suit this new situation. The sundered areas became appanages (dependent territories) ruled by a junior member of the imperial family who had full powers but remained subordinate to the emperor in Constantinople. Thus in 1403 the effective ruler of the Byzantine Morea was Manuel II's younger brother, Theodore, who bore the title of 'Despot', meaning simply Lord. He governed his small domain without consulting too much with his elder brother. In May 1394, for example, Theodore had on his own authority made a treaty with Venice and had ceded the town of Argos to the Italian republic. During the autumn of 1403, Manuel had established another of his relatives in an appanage, appointing his nephew John, who had earlier administered Constantinople while Manuel was on his tour of western Europe, as the ruler of Thessalonica. Even the monks of Mount Athos had long ago been granted almost complete autonomy by the Byzantine emperors, creating a kind of monastic republic.⁶

Perhaps the most startling limitation on the emperor's authority in his tiny empire was the existence of one quasi-independent enclave right next to his capital city and of another that was actually inside it.

The one inside it belonged to the merchants of the Italian city state of Venice and stretched along the Golden Horn from the Droungarios Gate to the Perama Gate in the Sea Walls. The Venetians had had their own quarter, or *embolo*, in Constantinople since 1082, but the enclave that existed in 1403 had been defined by a treaty that had been made between the Byzantine emperor and the Venetians in 1277. Within the area set aside for the Venetians, there were landing stages where goods were brought ashore from merchant vessels, and warehouses where they were stored. There were shops, taverns and mills and two churches where services were conducted in Latin, rather than Greek as they were in Byzantine churches. The Venetian residents of the *embolo* were not liable to Byzantine taxes nor were they answerable to Byzantine law courts. They were governed by a bailey who was appointed by and took his orders from the government of Venice. To all intents and purposes the emperor had no authority inside the *embolo*.⁷

The other enclave was the town of Pera, also known as Galata, which lay immediately across the Golden Horn from Constantinople. There too were to be found Catholic churches, warehouses and shops for the use of Italian merchants, although a considerable number of Greeks and Jews also lived in the town. Pera had been held by the Genoese since 1267. In theory, their presence there was a concession graciously bestowed by the emperor. The governor, or Podestà, had to take an oath of allegiance to the Byzantine emperor and originally was required to bow deeply when in the imperial presence. Genoese ships entering the Golden Horn were supposed to salute the Great Palace as they sailed by. By 1403, however, it is likely that these civilities had been forgotten and Pera was effectively a Genoese town, completely outside the emperor's jurisdiction.⁸

The wide gulf between the theoretical claims of the Byzantine emperor and the actual extent of his power had not gone unnoticed, nor had the contrast between his present impotence and the power and majesty of his long-dead predecessors. Visitors to Constantinople often

alluded to it in connection with a colossal statue of an emperor which stood on a lofty column outside the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. This majestic figure was astride a prancing horse in triumphant pose looking out toward the east, his right hand raised in warning to his enemies. In his left hand, the emperor held an orb surmounted by a cross, to symbolise his lordship over the whole Christian world. Some thought that the rider was Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor and the founder of Constantinople, others that it was Heraclius (r.610–641) who had defeated and humbled the Persians. Some knew that it was, in fact, Justinian I (r.527–565) who had built the great cathedral before which his monument stood.

The statue had come to be seen as a symbol of the contrast between the empire's glorious past and wretched present. It had been erected when the borders of Byzantium had stretched from Egypt to Italy, but after some nine centuries the years had taken their toll on the statue as much as they had on the empire. Elevated as it was on its column, it was particularly vulnerable to north-easterly gales that used to sweep around the Augousteion, and the horse had to be secured with a stout chain to ensure that it was not blown down. In spite of this precaution the statue regularly suffered damage, and on several occasions the orb was blown out of the emperor's hand and sent crashing onto the square below. Those who arrived in periods when the emperor's hand was empty, imbued the absence of the orb with deep significance. One Bavarian observer commented that it 'meant that he had once been a mighty emperor over Christians and infidels; but now he has no longer that power'. Others noticed that the emperor's hand was pointing to the east, to Asia Minor where the Ottomans had emerged, and concluded that he was making a prophecy that 'from this direction will come the one who will undo me'.⁹

Outsiders also expressed their awareness of the situation in the way they referred to the Byzantine emperor. Manuel II's loyal subjects might hail him as emperor of the Romans but everyone else called him

either ‘emperor of Constantinople’ or ‘emperor of the Greeks’, which reflected rather more accurately the extent of his dominion. Others, such as the grand duke of Moscow, denied that Manuel was even an emperor at all. A Spanish visitor to Constantinople compared him to a bishop without a see, and even Manuel himself had ruefully to admit that he would be better described as a caretaker than an emperor. In truth Byzantium had become a shadow empire and had been so ever since John V had submitted as a vassal to the Ottoman emir.¹⁰

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Byzantium in 1403 was not only small and powerless; it was poor. After eight years of hostilities with Bayezid it had been left impoverished and economically stagnant. The long blockade of Constantinople by land and sea had left the city depopulated and ruined. Such had been the shortage of wood for fuel during the siege that large numbers of houses had been demolished so that the roof and ceiling beams could be burned. As a visitor in 1403 noticed:

Everywhere throughout the city, there are many great palaces, churches and monasteries but most of them are now in ruin. It is plain, however, that in former times, when Constantinople was in its pristine state, it was one of the noblest capitals in the world.

Although Hagia Sophia had been kept in good repair, other churches had not been so fortunate. The church of Our Lady at Blachernae had holes in its roof and even the towering five-domed church of the Holy Apostles, the second largest in Constantinople, had not been spared. For centuries it had served as the last resting place of the Byzantine emperors, Constantine and Justinian among them, and their monumental porphyry sarcophagi still occupied its side chapels. But all around them,

the church of the Holy Apostles was slowly crumbling.¹¹ As the buildings decayed, the population had plummeted. Many people had left during Bayezid's siege and although the 1403 treaty with his son Suleyman had specifically provided for their safe return, it would seem that not all took advantage of the opportunity and the number of inhabitants had declined permanently to something in the region of 50,000. As a result, large areas within the city walls were sparsely settled, with most of the residents being clustered in the area along the Golden Horn.¹²

Other parts of the empire had not been subjected to the same relentless blockade as Constantinople, but they too had suffered. Bayezid had sent his armies into the Byzantine Peloponnese several times between 1395 and 1400 in a series of ruthless punitive raids led by his generals Evrenos and Yakub. The area around Mistra had been systematically laid waste and so bad had the situation become that the Despot Theodore had sold the town of Argos to the Venetians, and he even considered selling off his entire domain and escaping to safer territory.¹³ Thessalonica had escaped more lightly since it had been under Ottoman rule between 1387 and 1403 and so had not been attacked. Nevertheless, it had suffered from the general disruption to trade caused by the war and was hardly in flourishing condition when it returned to Byzantine rule in 1403.

The end of the war with Bayezid found many of Manuel II's subjects in desperate personal poverty, as one not very sympathetic visitor to Constantinople observed:

The inhabitants are not well-clad, but sad and poor, showing the hardness of their lot which is, however, not so bad as they deserve, for they are a vicious people, steeped in sin. It is their custom when anyone dies not to open the door of the house for the whole of that year except in case of necessity. They go continually about the city

howling as if in lamentation, and thus long ago foreshadowed the evil which has befallen them.¹⁴

Many of those who had stayed in Constantinople and survived the siege had been forced to sell what property and valuables they possessed to feed themselves and their families. A baker, Manuel Chrysovergis, and a wine merchant, Stylianos Chalkeopoulos, both found themselves in this situation and ended up in the patriarchal court because they were unable to pay their debts. Aristocrats were as vulnerable as anyone else. Manuel Vouzenos, who was a member of the imperial household, had sold everything he had to make ends meet and had to approach the patriarch of Constantinople for permission to sell his wife's house too. The patriarch agreed but insisted that the house be auctioned to see whether a higher price could be obtained than the 275 gold pieces that Vouzenos had been offered. When bidding closed, no superior bid had been made and the original purchaser then withdrew his offer. There was a kind of happy conclusion when another buyer was found who was willing to pay the 275 gold pieces, but how Vouzenos would have supported his family when that money was gone is anyone's guess. Much the same picture emerges in Thessalonica where many of the wealthier citizens who owned property outside the defensive walls had been impoverished by a combination of a shortage of agricultural labour and the unstable political and military conditions of the time. In 1420 one of them, Maria Hagoreitissa, gave some of her property inside Thessalonica to the monastery of Dionysiou on Mount Athos because, she claimed, she could no longer afford to maintain it. The clergy did not escape the legacy of the recent conflict either. The monks of the Kosmidion monastery, just outside the Land Walls of Constantinople, were so hard up that they had to sell slabs of marble from the floor of their church.¹⁵

Even the emperor himself was not immune from the general impoverishment. Manuel's own palace of Blachernae was in poor repair. It

would seem that many of the grand halls and reception rooms had become too costly to maintain and had been shut up. The emperor and his retinue now lived in a cramped suite of rooms while the rest of the sprawling complex of buildings was abandoned. The emperor's poverty was nowhere more apparent than in his coins. Manuel II issued no gold coins because he had no gold, and he could only produce a rather flimsy silver coin, the half-hyperpyron or stavraton. In the straitened circumstances of Bayezid's siege, its weight had had to be reduced from around 8.5 to about 7.5 grams, further undermining its credibility. Those who could do so stored their wealth in foreign coins such as the Venetian ducat or the Ottoman asper, which boasted a higher precious-metal content. Times had changed from the days when the Byzantine emperors had issued the gold Nomisma, whose standard weight had remained constant for centuries and which had been accepted as a means of exchange throughout the Mediterranean world.¹⁶

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Given the fragmented state of the empire and its economic woes, the prospects for its survival after 1403 might be thought to have been slim, in spite of the removal of the immediate threat from Bayezid. Even if the Ottomans had failed to pick off the shrunken empire, someone else surely very soon would. Yet that did not happen and Manuel II's mini-empire was to survive for another fifty years after his return from France. For in spite of everything that had happened, there were still a number of factors that worked to Byzantium's advantage. A small empire was easier to defend, the powers that surrounded it were as small and fragmented as it was, and finally, though the empire was impoverished in 1403, it had the potential to be wealthy again.

When it came to defence, Manuel's empire was very well provided for. Every significant town had a formidable set of fortifications. The obvious

example was Constantinople itself. The Land Walls that guarded its western side offered superb protection against attack. They formed a three-tier defence. There was an inner wall some twelve metres high and about five and a half metres thick, constructed of limestone blocks, divided at intervals by layers of bricks. It was punctuated by ninety-six towers, providing broad platforms for archers and catapults. Beyond the inner wall was a lower outer wall that had a further ninety-two towers. Beyond that was a wide, brick-lined moat, between fifteen and twenty metres across and between five and seven metres deep with a stockade made of brick and wood on the city side. Any attacking force would have first to cross the moat and clamber over the stockade while exposed to withering fire from the outer and inner walls. Even if they did get across and managed to capture the outer wall, they would find themselves trapped in the five-metre-wide corridor between it and the inner wall.

The fortifications continued along the seaward sides of Constantinople, linking up with the Land Walls, to deter assault by sea. These Sea Walls were not as formidable as their land counterparts but for much of their length they did not need to be, because the prevailing current in the Bosphorus made it impossible for ships to be brought close enough inshore to mount an assault on them. The only area of Constantinople's coast where ships could land was the stretch along the Golden Horn. Any possibility that enemy ships might try to take advantage of that by sailing into the harbour was closed off in times of crisis by a heavy iron chain, three hundred metres long, which was strung from a tower within the city to another in Pera. Wooden floats placed along the length of the chain kept it at the surface of the water, thereby preventing hostile vessels from entering.¹⁷

Thanks to these defences, Constantinople had withstood numerous sieges over the centuries, the most recent being that mounted by Bayezid. In spite of the misery and privations that the sultan's blockade had inflicted on the city's inhabitants, he had not been able to decide

the issue by breaking through the walls. Although Bayezid's main strategy had been to try to starve Constantinople into surrender, after some years he had grown impatient and had started to hope that he might be able to decide the issue more quickly by finding a chink in the defences. At one point, probably in 1396–7, he had turned his attention to Pera and moved his catapults and siege engines to a hill to the north of the Genoese-ruled town. If Pera fell, the Turks would be able to dismantle the chain and bring their ships into the Golden Horn. Pera's walls, however, proved no easier to breach and Bayezid's plan was frustrated. He had had to return to his waiting game until he broke off the siege in 1402 to march east against Timur, never to return.¹⁸

Other cities in Manuel's empire could not boast quite the level of defence that Constantinople enjoyed, but they were still strongly fortified. Thessalonica was surrounded by a rough rectangle of walls on both the landward and seaward sides, with some twenty gateways and over a hundred towers which were linked at the highest point of the city to the citadel, the fortress of Heptapyrgon. Again these fortifications had proved their worth in the past, when the young Manuel had used Thessalonica as the base for his resistance to the Turks in the 1380s. When the city finally fell to Murad I in 1387, it was not taken by force but was surrendered voluntarily by the citizens. Elsewhere in Manuel's empire Mesembria on the Black Sea had a natural defence in that the town was built on an offshore peninsula that could be reached only by a narrow causeway. The same applied to Monemvasia in the southern Peloponnese and was reflected in its name, which means 'single entrance'. The Monemvasiots had the added advantage that their town was perched on a forbidding rock that towered above the sea, making it almost impossible to take by storm. Mistra, the capital of the Byzantine Peloponnese, was surrounded by a strong wall but its real defensive asset was its castle, which was built on a rock high above the town. Due to the sheer cliffs, the fortress was inaccessible from most directions and

effectively impregnable. The Byzantines had fortified all the other towns they held that did not have such geographical advantages, such as Selymbria on the Sea of Marmara, Palaiokastron and Kotzinos on the island of Limnos, and Mouchli in the Morea, which controlled the main routes to the south.¹⁹

As it happened, in 1403 there was no power in the area that looked likely to put these defences to the test. Byzantium existed in a world of similar scattered, ramshackle lordships, none of which was in a position to pose a direct and immediate threat. In the Balkans, for example, the Ottoman ruler Suleyman still controlled a considerable territory from Adrianople but he no longer had the allegiance of all the vassal states that had provided his father Bayezid with manpower for his armies and tribute for his treasury. Suleyman had been forced to forego all that when he made treaties with them in 1403. Nor did his writ run in the eastern part of the Ottoman empire, in Asia Minor where several of his brothers had seized tracts of territory for themselves.

With Ottoman power thus severely curtailed, it might have been expected that another state would fill the vacuum and dominate the Balkans instead. The Serbs might have been likely contenders, for back in the fourteenth century under Tsar Stefan Dushan (r.1331–1355) Serbia had been the strongest power in the region and had for a time looked poised to take over the entire Balkans and Constantinople with it. There was no return to those days because by 1403 the Serbs had become embroiled in a civil war. Their ruler, the Despot Stefan Lazarevich, had returned in 1402 from the battle of Ankara, in which he had taken part on the Ottoman side, to find his nephew George Brankovich in revolt. Stefan succeeded in putting down the insurrection but only by accepting the overlordship of Sigismund, king of Hungary. Serbia therefore went straight from being an Ottoman vassal to a Hungarian one. Rather than any major power emerging in the void left by the removal of Bayezid, it was the small lordships that profited. The

Italian adventurer Carlo Tocco, for example, who ruled the Ionian islands of Cephalonia and Leukas from 1376 to 1429, took advantage of the situation to expand onto the mainland, taking over the city of Ioannina in 1411 and securing the whole of Epiros by the end of 1416. The small city state of Ragusa on the Croatian coast (the modern Dubrovnik) prospered economically in the new order of things, becoming a centre for the manufacture and export of cannon which it sold to anyone who could pay.²⁰

The Aegean and the Peloponnese presented a picture of fragmentation similar to the Balkans. The islands of the Aegean were parcelled out among a multiplicity of rulers and regimes. Crete and Negroponte (now known as Evvia) were colonies of Venice. Chios, along with Phokaia on the Asia Minor mainland opposite, belonged to the Genoese who exploited their rich reserves of mastic and alum. Rhodes was the headquarters of the Knights Hospitaller, also known as the Knights of St John, the Catholic military order who had found a home there in 1309 after their expulsion from the Holy Land and Cyprus. Lesbos was ruled by a Genoese family called the Gattilusi, who were nominally the vassals of the Byzantine emperor, and other islands belonged to Italian families such as the Crispi and Sanudi. In the Peloponnese, Byzantine territory around Mistra was surrounded by small enclaves and lordships originally founded on former Byzantine territory by French, Italian and Catalan adventurers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The largest was the principality of Achaia, which controlled most of the Peloponnese outside Byzantine control. Patras was a fief of the papacy and ruled by its archbishop. The towns of Modon and Coron and, after 1394 Argos, belonged to Venice. Corinth was owned by the Knights Hospitaller in 1403. Athens was ruled by a branch of a family of Florentine bankers, the Acciaiuoli, who had built up their duchy by a mixture of marriage, purchase and war. When Bayezid had ruled a united and powerful Ottoman empire, it

had looked as if all these small states would be swallowed up one by one. Now with Bayezid dead and his son Suleyman in control only of the Balkan provinces, the old patchwork of lordships was given a new lease of life. None of them posed any threat to Byzantium.

There was another point in favour of Manuel II's mini-empire. Although it had been devastated and impoverished by the war with Bayezid, it had the potential to recover and be rich. As soon as the threat was lifted in 1402–3, an economic revival began. The most marked recovery was in the Peloponnese, which from an economic point of view was the emperor's most valuable possession. Severe though the Turkish invasions had been and turbulent though its inhabitants were at times, the area was naturally extremely fertile and productive. An Italian visitor in 1444 noticed that the landscape was 'rich in cultivated fields, vineyards and olive trees', and these produced a large surplus of grain, wax, honey, raisins, wine, cochineal, raw silk and olive oil. The wealth of the Morea seems to have excited some envy in Constantinople where a courtier was advised to:

Take yourself, lock, stock and barrel, to Morea, and fill your belly with meat and olives, with bread and nectar, not to mention ham and very special soup.

The agricultural surplus was sold to the Venetians of Coron and Modon, who then exported it to the west. Wine from the Morea became a sought-after commodity there, being known as 'Malmsey', a corruption of 'Monemvasia'.²¹

The Byzantine islands had the potential to be prosperous too. On Limnos and Thasos, the monasteries of Mount Athos owned large and productive estates. The relatively fertile low-lying eastern side of Limnos was a source of grain and wine that could be shipped to Constantinople and elsewhere. The island also exported the so-called

‘Limnian earth’, a yellowish-grey soil that was said to cure snake bites and other wounds. Nearby Thasos was more mountainous and heavily forested than Limnos but it was a useful source of timber and marble.²²

Agriculture and forestry could not contribute much to the prosperity of Constantinople and Thessalonica, large cities with small hinterlands over which they had only sporadic control, but they did possess other advantages. Thessalonica had a great deal of open space within its long defensive walls that could be cultivated, developed and rented out, and this became a source of wealth for some when the Turks departed in 1403. More importantly, Thessalonica was well positioned to prosper. Since it stood both on the sea and on the Via Egnatia, the old Roman road that crossed the Balkans, it was a kind of crossroads with travellers of all kinds passing through. It was a centre for pilgrimage, thanks to its patron saint Demetrius. Purportedly a Christian soldier who had been martyred in Roman times, the saint’s miraculous interventions were believed to have saved Thessalonica from its enemies time and time again. His tomb in the great basilica that was dedicated to him was believed to exude a fragrant and healing myrrh, and his festival on 26 October was the pretext for a week of celebrations and fairs that drew in visitors from a wide area. Its geographical position also made Thessalonica a natural centre for trade, a meeting point for goods brought in by land and sea. With the return of more settled conditions, merchant ships and caravans were once more calling at Thessalonica. Cotton was once more being exported from the port in Venetian ships. Within a few years Manuel II could write contentedly that ‘the city dear to me is prospering’.²³

Constantinople had the same advantages as Thessalonica but even more so. Since its shrunken population was concentrated alongside the Golden Horn and in the area around Hagia Sophia and the Augousteion, the remaining area within the walls could be given over to cornfields and orchards, which must have been a useful source of

supplies during the dark days of Bayezid's siege. Like Thessalonica, Constantinople could exploit the pilgrimage trade. Thanks to its many churches and the collection of relics that had so impressed Manuel II's Spanish guests, it had retained a certain spiritual aura. Pilgrims still journeyed from as far afield as Russia to experience the wonders and one of them, who visited in Manuel II's day, recorded that there were so many churches and relics that it was impossible to see them all or even to count them. Constantinople was also to some extent a centre of production of luxury goods, particularly gold-embroidered cloth and the thread that was used in it. Some examples of this late Byzantine embroidery still survive and records show that gold thread was exported from Constantinople to Italy.²⁴

Far more important than either the pilgrimage trade or the production of luxury goods was Constantinople's role as a centre for international trade. Due to its geographical position, on the bridge between Europe and Asia, it had always acted as an entrepôt where goods from one part of the world could be exchanged for those of another. Cereals, fish and furs from the Black Sea coast and the Crimea; wine and cheese from Venetian-ruled Crete; cotton, sulphur, linen, figs, raisins, soap, hides, tallow, tin, iron and lead were just a few of the vast array of commodities that were traded in Constantinople. The most lucrative were the silks, spices and other exotic cargoes that came by sea from Egypt or from Asia, after having been carried overland and loaded onto ships at Trebizond some 550 miles to the east. Constantinople also acted as a distribution centre for silk garments produced in Italy, which were traded there before being shipped on to Crete or Alexandria. This role as a clearing station for goods seems to have been resumed the moment that Bayezid's army left and the naval blockade was lifted, for a visitor to Constantinople in late 1403 noticed that the Golden Horn was full of ships discharging their cargoes and that the shore facing Pera was lined with warehouses and shops full of goods brought from

overseas. All this activity must have presented a stark contrast with the abject poverty of the emperor and many of his subjects.²⁵

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Part of the reason for the gulf between the poverty of the empire and its flourishing commerce was that much of that trade was in the hands of foreign powers, primarily the Italian maritime republics of Venice and Genoa. It was their ships that brought in most of the goods and it was in their warehouses, either in Pera or in the Venetian quarters of Constantinople and Thessalonica, that they were stored. It was their ships that then carried them out again, to be sold at a huge profit elsewhere. Pera's share in the volume of trade was particularly large because the harbour there had the advantage of deeper water, so that even the largest galleys could moor right next to the quayside with no need to ferry goods ashore in smaller boats.²⁶

It was nothing new for foreign merchants to do much of the fetching and carrying, but in the past the Byzantine authorities had profited by levying a customs duty, known as the *Kommerkion*, on all goods that entered or left the Golden Horn, or any other port in the empire for that matter. By 1403, however, the powerful Venetians and Genoese had compelled the Byzantine emperor to grant them complete exemptions from this tax, so that their activities brought almost no benefit to the Byzantine treasury. By the mid-fourteenth century, it was estimated that although the Genoese earned two hundred thousand gold pieces a year in duties on the trade of Pera, the Byzantine treasury was receiving a mere thirty thousand. In theory, of course, the Byzantine emperor could still collect the *Kommerkion* from merchants from elsewhere, such as those from the Italian city of Ancona and those from Balkan states such as Wallachia. In practice, the tax could easily be avoided by wily entrepreneurs who used Venetian or Genoese vessels to ship the merchandise.

Another ruse was to buy Venetian or Genoese citizenship, which brought with it exemption from the tax.²⁷

The emperor found it quite difficult to do anything about this state of affairs. That was partly because he feared that the Italians might take military reprisals and partly because the Venetians in particular had a certain hold on him that went back to the previous generation and beyond. In 1343 Manuel II's grandmother, Empress Anna of Savoy, had obtained from Venice a loan of 30,000 ducats to help fund a civil war in which the empire was then embroiled. For security, she had handed over the Byzantine crown jewels. The loan had never been repaid, nor had the interest on it, and Venetian envoys to the Byzantine emperor regularly reminded him of the very large sum that was still outstanding. In April 1403, even before Manuel II had returned from France, such an envoy was already on his way to Constantinople to demand the repayment of an instalment at least.²⁸

Nevertheless, the emperor did make sporadic attempts to renegotiate the position and claw back some revenue from Constantinople's trade. In 1418 Manuel II imposed a modest tax on wine being sold in Venetian-owned taverns in Constantinople. The Venetians protested vigorously that this was a breach of their commercial privileges and after much wrangling the emperor agreed to withdraw the tax on wine that was consumed off the premises. As far as wine consumed in the taverns was concerned, Manuel stood firm. In the end, it is unlikely that he gained much financially, for many of the Venetian taverns subsequently went out of business, shunned by customers who now found their wine too pricey.²⁹

A similar attempt to redress the balance vis-à-vis the Genoese occurred some sixteen years later and this time it led to armed conflict. The Genoese podestà of Pera discovered that the Byzantine emperor was attempting to lure merchants away from his port so that they would discharge their cargoes on the Constantinople side of the Golden Horn and pay their duties to the imperial authorities. Such provocation could

not be taken lying down and the podestà sent a flotilla of Genoese ships across the harbour to take reprisals. Their crews set fire to a number of shops and warehouses before they were engaged by some Byzantine vessels and a spirited, if small-scale, engagement ensued. It was the Byzantines who came off best in the encounter and in the end the Genoese backed off. The podestà reluctantly agreed to pay for the damage they had done.³⁰ In both incidents, the emperor had stuck to his guns and won some minor improvement to his position, but he had encountered such stiff opposition that it was scarcely worth the effort. The profits of Constantinople's trade remained firmly in the hands of the Italian republics.

It is therefore tempting to see the Venetians and Genoese as greedy leeches who had fastened onto the declining empire and enriched themselves at its expense. There were certainly contemporaries who saw them in that light. One pope denounced the Venetians as 'merchants whose nature, intent on gain, usually shrinks from noble aims which cannot be achieved without expense'. Venetian and Genoese domination of Constantinople's entrepôt trade did benefit the Byzantines in some ways, however. Their merchant galleys had proved a lifeline during Bayezid's siege when they had ferried in the corn supplies that had kept the city from starvation. Moreover, although they jealously guarded their privileges against the Byzantine emperor and against each other, the Venetians and Genoese were also facilitators of commerce and profit. They had created and now maintained all the prerequisites for long-distance communication and trade. The most obvious of these prerequisites was shipping. Both Venice and Genoa had perfected the construction of the so-called 'great galleys', large merchant vessels up to forty-six metres long and able to carry 250 tons of cargo beneath their decks. Fleets of these ships sailed every spring not only to Constantinople and the eastern Mediterranean but also to western Europe. They were as familiar a sight in the ports of Bruges, Rouen, Southampton and London as they were

in Alexandria or the Golden Horn, and they provided an international communication and transport network that covered a large part of the Christian and Muslim worlds. These great galleys did not just carry cargo belonging to Venetian or Genoese merchants but provided freight for anyone who paid the charges. For example, in 1393 over one hundred sacks of wool were transported from Southampton to Genoa on Genoese ships, but the owners of the wool were English merchants. Similarly, £247-worth of soap and grain for dyeing were imported during 1404–5 into Southampton by Venetian vessels, but these cargoes belonged to local merchants who no doubt planned to sell them on at a considerable mark-up.³¹

Perhaps even more important as a stimulus for international trade, Venice and Genoa, along with other Italian cities, were centres for banking and international exchange. Genoa was the headquarters of the famous Bank of St George, while it was in Venice that bankers first developed the all-important bill of exchange. These were orders to pay in one place with one kind of money in return for a deposit made elsewhere, often Venice itself, in another currency, thus enabling merchants and travellers to operate in far-off destinations without the need to carry large amounts of coins with them. Just how widespread and useful this service was comes across in the experience of Arnold von Harff, a German nobleman who went on pilgrimage at the end of the fifteenth century. Arriving in Venice to board his ship, von Harff had first to hand over his German money for bills that could be exchanged at his destination. Unsurprisingly, von Harff was a little apprehensive that once he was in Muslim territory the bills would not be honoured. He need not have worried:

When I came to a heathen town and presented these bills to the person to whom they were made out, although I could not speak with him, I nodded my head at him and kissed my finger in order to

show my respect, and gave him the bills. Whereupon he would stare at me and disappear into the back of his house, returning at once and paying me my money, indicating with his finger that I should write down how much I had received.³²

The availability of shipping and international finance led to another of the contrasts that characterised Manuel II's empire. Although the Byzantine emperor could not benefit much from commerce, some of his subjects could and did. While the emperor and most of his people sank into poverty, these individuals bucked the general trend and prospered, even during the terrible years of siege from 1394 to 1402. Just like the merchants of Southampton, they could import and export goods on Italian vessels. Money could be deposited in Constantinople or Pera with a bank or commission agent, who would then invest it in cargoes going in and out and provide a return to the investor. Retail sales were another opportunity. Imported goods, usually cloth, could be purchased from Italian shippers and then sold on at a profit. In the same way, goods such as grain, skins, wool and raw silk could be sold to the Venetians or Genoese for export.³³

Among those who profited from the Venetian and Genoese trading networks was a man called George Goudelis. He specialised in buying corn from the Genoese of Pera and his family even did well out of Bayezid's siege. His son John had succeeded in dodging the sultan's fleet and bringing cargoes of corn and wine safely to the Golden Horn. The Goudelis family then sold these commodities at a hugely inflated price. Another prominent and successful family was that of Notaras, which originally came from Monemvasia in the southern Peloponnese. By 1403 Nicholas Notaras was well on the way to becoming the richest man in Constantinople. Such activity was not restricted to the capital, for some commercial clans in Thessalonica were able to take advantage of their city's trade in much the same way.³⁴

It was not only new families like the Notaras who were profiting from these opportunities. A satirist commented darkly that some Byzantine courtiers:

model themselves upon the aristocratic style of the Italian group, with its greed for money, its small dealer's mentality, its stuffy and cramped atmosphere, its crookedness and trickery.³⁵

These were the families whose members had traditionally held office at the Byzantine court and constituted the so-called Senate. They marked their elite status with long composite names designed to show off their imperial connections, such as Manuel Palaiologos Iagaris. They boasted of their higher education in the Greek classics and sported imposing titles such as Grand Stratopedarch or Protostrator that had been conferred on them by the emperor. But in these straitened times, even such grandees were not above making money from trade. Manuel II's older cousin, Theodore Palaiologos Kantakouzenos, whom he had sent as an envoy to Russia in 1400, was among those who had economic ties with Venetian merchants, probably buying and selling cloth for resale. On the proceeds, he was able to build a splendid mansion for himself in the south-western corner of Constantinople. Whatever the economic woes of the Byzantine emperor, some people were doing very well for themselves.³⁶

That then was the shadow empire which Manuel II ruled in 1403. It was an empire of contradictions. In theory it was universal but in practice it was a small set of widely separated territories. It was ruled by the successor of the Caesars, yet his writ scarcely ran even within his own small domain. The emperor and most of his subjects had been reduced to poverty by years of war and blockade, yet some Byzantines were making immense fortunes through trade. There was one further contradiction. Small as the empire was, that did not mean it was compact and united. The deep divisions within it were to define the last decades of its existence.



Playing Politics

EVEN AS THE Turks were hammering at the gates of Constantinople and even as the empire stood on the brink of destruction, the Byzantines still managed to find time to fight internal civil wars and to involve themselves in intricate and interminable theological squabbles. Their apparently skewed understanding of priorities has perplexed and exasperated subsequent generations and alienated their sympathy. It has led to the last Byzantines being condemned as having not 'the slightest conception of patriotism or of personal honour or of the sacredness of family ties'.¹ Such judgements fail to understand the nature of the situation. Whereas in an ideal world everyone would agree and work together towards agreed goals, in every society there are differences of opinion and interest that have to be expressed and resolved in one way or another. In the medieval world this was not carried out through political parties, televised debates or elections but through dynastic rivalry for the highest office in the land, usually that of king. A prime example is that of England between 1399 and 1485, when the houses of Lancaster and York fought for control of the throne and four kings met violent ends. Byzantium was no different from other medieval kingdoms, political rivalry being focused on control of the office of emperor. And as in other societies, that rivalry was a way

of expressing deep underlying ideological differences, in this case over how to deal with the Latins and the Ottoman Turks.

In the distant past, when Byzantium had been a great power in the world, there had been constant revolts as ambitious generals attempted to seize the throne and establish their own dynasty. By the late fourteenth century, that was no longer the case. The throne of Byzantium was not such a coveted prize and it was now accepted that only members of the ruling Palaiologos family could occupy it. Unfortunately there had been a disagreement over which one of them it should be.

Manuel II had not originally been the designated successor to his father, John V. There was an older brother, Andronicus, who had been the obvious heir to the throne. The trouble had started because Andronicus was not prepared to wait. Tall, good-looking and athletic, he had gathered around him a circle of supporters disgruntled at the disastrous course that events seemed to be taking under John V. In fact, Andronicus does not seem to have liked his father much either. In 1371, when John V was returning from his visit to the Pope in Rome to make his personal submission to the Catholic faith, he only got as far as Venice. There he was ignominiously arrested by the city's government for debt. From his prison John wrote to Andronicus, who had been left behind to administer Constantinople in his absence, asking him to send enough money to satisfy the Venetians. Andronicus refused, on the grounds that it would be an inappropriate use of the treasury. Luckily for John, his second son Manuel was not so hard-hearted. He gathered the necessary funds, sailed to Venice and secured his father's release. When John V finally reached Constantinople, the tension between him and Andronicus was at boiling point.²

In May 1373 the storm broke. Andronicus and his followers entered into an alliance with Saudzi, the son of the Ottoman emir Murad I, and the two princes staged simultaneous revolts against their fathers. Within a few weeks, the rebellion was crushed after Murad and John V

joined forces against their troublesome offspring. Andronicus surrendered to his father and was sent into exile on the island of Limnos. This was no mere temporary disgrace, for John V seems to have taken the decision to cut Andronicus out of the succession and to make sure that he would never be able to claim the throne.

Exile and disinheritance were not the only punishments that John V meted out to his rebellious son. Allegedly, he was instructed by his Ottoman overlord to have Andronicus blinded, for Murad had just subjected Saudzi to the same horrible punishment. John V, who was apparently rather weak-willed and not particularly bright, tamely complied and ordered that his eldest son be blinded. This was done by pouring boiling vinegar over his eyes. To make absolutely certain, the emperor also had Andronicus's young son John, who cannot have been more than a child at the time, subjected to the same treatment. Traditionally in Byzantium, blindness had been a disqualification for the throne, so there can be no doubt about John's intentions here. Around the same time he had his second son Manuel crowned as co-emperor, thus clearly designating him as his successor.³

If John V thought that this would be the end of the matter he was severely mistaken. Whether out of humanity or incompetence, the attempt to blind Andronicus and his son failed and they both recovered their sight, although young John suffered from a squint for the rest of his life. Gossip at the time put the recovery down to remedies administered by Andronicus's loyal wife who regularly visited him in prison. John V nevertheless took pity on his son and resolved to release him, a decision that proved to be unwise. In the summer of 1376, with the military assistance of the Ottomans and the Genoese of Pera, Andronicus marched on Constantinople. Supporters on the inside admitted his troops through one of the gates in the Land Walls and after three days of street fighting he was master of the city. John V and his sons Manuel and Theodore fled to the fortress of the Golden Gate

at the end of the Land Walls in the south-west of the city, where they held out against Andronicus's soldiers. Manuel was unable to play much part in the defence for he had been injured in the fighting and lay prostrate with his head on the lap of his younger brother Theodore. With no prospect of outside help, John and his sons were compelled to surrender after a few weeks. The vengeful Andronicus had all three incarcerated in the Tower of Anemas close to the palace of Blachernae and had himself crowned emperor as Andronicus IV. He then ruled the empire in his own right for almost three years.⁴

At the end of that time, Andronicus's coup was dramatically reversed. A group of supporters succeeded in springing John V and his sons from the Tower of Anemas, allowing them to flee from Constantinople to land beyond Andronicus's reach. They returned with an army and on 1 July 1379 succeeded in entering the city, causing the erstwhile emperor to flee with his family to Pera. Andronicus's brief reign was over but the feud within the Palaiologos family was not. With Andronicus safely in Pera, there was something of a stalemate between him and his father. In the end, John V decided to back down and in May 1381 he made a treaty with his eldest son. He granted Andronicus the town of Selymbria as his appanage and restored him as the heir to the throne. Manuel, who had been John's heir for the past few years, was effectively disinherited. That probably explains why Manuel went off to Thessalonica in 1382 to confront the Turks, disgruntled that he had been demoted to second place once more.⁵

Within a few years, the tortuous story took another twist. On 28 June 1385, Andronicus, who was not yet forty, fell ill and died. His father John V was still alive and on the throne, so in theory the heir was now Andronicus's son, John. Young John, however, seems to have feared that his uncle Manuel would worm his way back into the succession and so decided to pre-empt the issue. In the middle of the night on 13 April 1390, backed by troops helpfully provided by the Ottoman Sultan

Bayezid, he gained entry to Constantinople and the ensuing confusion was described by a Russian pilgrim who happened to be there at the time:

There was din all over the city, and soldiers lit the whole city with lanterns as they raced around the city on foot and on horseback among the crowds of people in their nightclothes. They carried weapons in their hands and had arrows ready in their bows as they cried 'Long live [the son of] Andronicus!'. . . . The turmoil of the city was wondrous to see and hear: some people were trembling with fright, others rejoicing.⁶

There was some fighting which continued until mid-morning, but by then it was quite clear that young John's coup had succeeded and that he was in complete control of the city. Realising that there was nothing he could do, the elderly John V did what he had done in 1376 and hastily locked himself in the fortress of the Golden Gate. By evening, his grandson was widely being recognised as Emperor John VII.

Knowing that his grandfather might stage a comeback at any moment, the new emperor besieged the Golden Gate fortress throughout the summer but was unable to force the garrison to surrender. In the meantime, Manuel had succeeded in escaping from Constantinople by sea before John VII's soldiers had established full control. Heading south, first to Limnos and then to Rhodes, he gathered troops, including a contingent from the Knights of St John. With these forces he returned to make a series of naval assaults on Constantinople, finally succeeding in fighting his way into the harbour that lay adjacent to the Golden Gate fortress. He then organised a counterattack, leading his followers out against the besiegers. He chose his moment well, for it happened that John VII and his troops were disarmed and having dinner at the time, and so were slow to respond

to the danger. By the time they did, it was too late. Manuel's forces were in control of the city and there was nothing that John VII could do but flee to his father's old appanage of Selymbria.⁷

With Manuel now clearly in a commanding position, it was he and not his nephew who succeeded as emperor when John V finally died on 16 February 1391. But although he had won the race, Manuel could not ignore his nephew who still had powerful allies to back him in a bid for the throne at any time. Many people regarded him as the rightful emperor and openly canvassed for him to be allowed to return to Constantinople. John VII also had powerful support outside the city, for he was dangerously friendly with Manuel's enemy, Bayezid. When John appeared at the infamous meeting at Serres in 1394, Manuel was terrified, believing that Bayezid meant to murder him and give Constantinople to John instead. A rapprochement was eventually achieved. When Marshal Boucicaut arrived in Constantinople in 1399, he took it upon himself to try to bring about a reconciliation between the two men and he succeeded in doing so. John VII returned to Constantinople in December 1399 and accepted the governorship of the city while Manuel II was away on his travels in western Europe in search of military assistance.⁸

The tension could never quite go away, in spite of all Boucicaut's efforts. When Manuel arrived back in Constantinople in June 1403, he heard disturbing news about what had been going on in his absence. Byzantine soldiers, who had looted the abandoned Turkish camp outside the city when the Ottoman siege had been lifted, had discovered a letter written by Bayezid to John who had apparently been negotiating with the sultan about the surrender of Constantinople. Outraged by what he considered to be his nephew's treachery, Manuel exiled him to Limnos in disgrace. As always, however, Manuel could not leave a resentful and dangerous John VII around to cause future problems. It soon became clear that John was planning to gather a fleet to attack

Thessalonica with the help of the Genoese ruler of Lesbos. Some accommodation would have to be arrived at once more. During the autumn of 1403, it was agreed that John would have Thessalonica to rule as an appanage. His title was not to be that of 'despot' like Manuel's younger brother Theodore at Mistra, but 'Emperor of All Thessaly'. The agreement was also that John should succeed Manuel as emperor on the latter's death and that Manuel's son John would then be John VII's heir, followed by John VII's son Andronicus as the next in line. Manuel was careful to ensure, however, that John was kept company in Thessalonica by one of Manuel's most trusted officers, Demetrius Laskaris Leontaris, who no doubt reported back to Manuel on his nephew's conduct.⁹

It must have been hard for Manuel to forget the past completely. Publicly, he was careful not to give any hint of that resentment, going so far as to praise John VII's administration of Thessalonica and calling him 'an excellent charioteer who knows how to drive a chariot and a pilot seated at the tiller at whose nod all obey'. On another occasion, when writing a speech, Manuel's feelings seem to have got the better of him and he wrote some vitriolic lines, only then to cross them through so that they could not be read. Only in the twentieth century, when ultraviolet light made it possible to read through the erasure on the manuscript to the handwriting beneath was the depth of Manuel's bitterness revealed:

That despicable person – that is what he is, he is not my nephew – that disastrous threat to the Rhomaic [i.e. Byzantine] people, who is a threat also to himself, he does what he thinks will lead him to power; but what he does will also bring him to slavery. It is clear that in destroying the Empire – that very Empire he dreams of ruling – he is virtually destroying himself . . .¹⁰

Manuel was not being entirely fair here. John was not as selfish and destructive as his uncle made out. His rule in Thessalonica seems to

have been very successful and he was remembered there as a pious and virtuous man. It was even said after his death that miraculous cures were experienced at his tomb. Nevertheless, not surprisingly, contemporary observers in 1403 were pessimistic as to the long-term chances of peace between the two emperors, one of them opining that it was 'a surety that neither the one prince nor the other will carry out the present compact'.¹¹

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Whatever the ups and downs of this convoluted saga, it is quite clear from reading contemporary accounts that it was not just a quarrel between princes; a wide cross-section of Byzantine society was involved in it as well. Both parties had their supporters who backed them in the endless round of coup and counter-coup. John V and Manuel II, who represented the status quo, would obviously have had plenty of backing, and it was reported that when John VII broke into Constantinople in 1390, many of their supporters took refuge in Hagia Sophia. The partisans of John VII, however, were not inconsiderable. On the eve of his coup of April 1390, some fifty conspirators who had planned to help him enter Constantinople were unmasked and punished, but there were still enough left to open the gates to him twelve days later. When John VII entered the city crowds of poorer people turned out to cheer him, although one eyewitness considered that the presence of John's soldiers with drawn swords might have made many feel it politic to shout their support. John VII apparently had some powerful and wealthy backers too, who were prepared to stand by him in bad times as well as good. When he was driven out of Constantinople in August 1390, some of these accompanied him back to Selymbria, including Komnenos Vranas who was married to Manuel II's aunt. A number of prominent individuals shared John's exile on

Limnos and then accompanied him to Thessalonica when he took over as ruler in 1403.¹²

Such dogged loyalty gives rise to the question of why a Byzantine should support one member of the Palaiologos family or another. There were, no doubt, many reasons that varied from individual to individual. Personal loyalty was probably the most important. Manuel II, for example, could count on the support of his friend and former tutor, Demetrius Kydones, who refused to serve under Andronicus IV when he seized power in 1376. Demetrius Chrysoloras, on the other hand, remained true to John VII, residing at his court in Selymbria and serving as his chief adviser in Thessalonica after 1403.¹³ There were, however, economic and ideological reasons that inclined some individuals to one side or another. Among those reasons two stand out as the most important: links to the Italian maritime republics of Venice and Genoa and the wealth that their trading networks had engendered for some, and secondly, attitudes to the Ottoman Turks.

When it comes to the Italian maritime republics, it is significant that both Andronicus IV and his son John VII enjoyed the support of the Genoese of Pera. At the time that Andronicus seized Constantinople in 1376, he had a large contingent of Genoese troops with him, some 150 of whom were reportedly killed in the subsequent street fighting. As a reward for their help, Andronicus promised the Genoese the strategically important island of Tenedos. John VII, for his part, was married to a member of the Genoese Gattilusio family, and following the defeat of his coup in 1390 he travelled to Genoa, possibly in the hope of garnering support for another attempt on the throne.¹⁴ John V and Manuel II, on the other hand, seem to have had the aid of the Venetians, who probably assisted them in their escape from prison and in their overthrow of Andronicus IV in 1379. The two Italian maritime republics were bitter commercial rivals and so backed their respective Palaiologoi in the hope of advancing their interests. Venice's support for John V in 1379 was

largely motivated by a determination that the Genoese should not get their hands on Tenedos, for if they held the island they would be able to block the Dardanelles to Venetian merchant ships.¹⁵

These developments were not only of interest to the Venetians and Genoese but also to those Byzantines who had grown rich by exploiting the commercial networks created by the two Italian city states. If their financial interests lay with Genoa, it made sense to support John VII. Nicholas Notaras and George Goudelis seem to have fallen into this category. In the weeks before the 1390 coup, they were both in Genoa negotiating grain shipments and possibly Genoese military support for John VII. Although John VII's coup ultimately failed, those who had backed him did not necessarily lose out. Sometime in the late fourteenth century, a nobleman called Theodore Potamios wrote an angry letter, denouncing the effect that the conflict between Manuel II and John VII was having on the empire:

Each of the emperors, rather, is intent only on pleasure, on shameful honour and on sullied wealth for himself. They have dragged the country of the Romans down to this point of misfortune.

Yet he went on to admit that the outcome was not a disaster for everyone:

One result is that a large number of undeserving people have chanced upon the greatest honours and, contrary to all justice and reason, have also amassed wealth for themselves.

Potamios did not name those who had profited from the conflict, but Nicholas Notaras and George Goudelis may well have been the type of people that he had in mind. They both went on to enjoy considerable success and bring spectacular wealth to their families.¹⁶

Then there was the other issue that might have prompted some Byzantines to back John VII rather than Manuel II: the matter of relations with the Ottoman Turks. Thanks to the initial aggressive expansion of Islam and the later Christian response in the Crusades, it is easy to assume that Muslims and Christians were in a state of constant antagonism and warfare throughout the Middle Ages. This was by no means always so, and Byzantine relations with the Ottoman Turks are a case in point. Although it was true that many in the Ottoman camp eyed Constantinople enviously and longed to find a way to capture the city, that was not all there was to the relationship and since their arrival in the Balkans in the mid-fourteenth century, the Turks had come to interact with the Byzantines in all kinds of peaceful ways.

Byzantines and Turks were trading partners. There was a thriving traffic which was carried on across the Bosphorus at Skoutari. Passing travellers noticed that Byzantine merchants would regularly cross over there by boat to do business. Subjects of the Ottoman sultan were among those taking advantage of Constantinople's entrepôt trade. There was a small community of Turkish merchants in Constantinople who had their own quarter, like that of the Venetians, and a resident *kadi*, or judge, to oversee their interests and arbitrate in their commercial disputes. These arrangements had been disrupted when Bayezid had changed his father Murad's policy and laid siege to Constantinople in 1394. Manuel II, hardly surprisingly, had responded by ejecting all Turkish residents of the city and demolishing their mosque. Now, with the war over, the treaty of 1403 specifically provided for Byzantine merchants to have access to Ottoman ports at a reasonable level of customs duty. At some point thereafter the *kadi* returned to Constantinople along with the Ottoman merchants and normal relations were resumed.¹⁷

Commercial relations aside, the sheer proximity in which the Byzantines and Ottoman Turks lived ensured that they had little choice but to work with each other, and they frequently did. Before 1394 the

Byzantine emperor had been a vassal of the Ottoman sultan, obliged to provide him with a contingent of troops for his army, but there were also Turkish mercenaries serving in the Byzantine army. They seem to have gone by the name of *Ianitzaroi*, possibly a corruption of the Turkish word, janissary. There were also Byzantines in the service of the Ottomans such as Taronites, who was the personal physician of Emir Orhan, and numerous scribes and administrators. Outside the cities, Byzantine Greeks and Turks were neighbours, often on very friendly terms. When in 1403 Bayezid's son Suleyman hoped to buy peace with Venice, he promised the Italian republic a stretch of territory on the Greek mainland opposite its island colony of Negroponte. The Turks who lived in the area were most unhappy about being handed over to Venetian rule in this way and they were supported in their refusal to give up their land by the Greeks who lived nearby.¹⁸

The constant everyday interaction between Byzantines and Turks meant that they were bound to end up adopting aspects of each others' cultures. It was said that the Byzantines had learned the art of horse archery from the Turks, who had long been adept at loosing off volleys of arrows while galloping at high speed. By the same token, it is clear that the Turks had learned about ships and sea craft from the Byzantines, and hence Turkish vocabulary in this area was largely derived from Greek. In general it would seem that although the Ottomans were the stronger military power, in cultural terms they received more from the Byzantines than vice versa. The Ottoman capital of Adrianople was a populous commercial centre and it was starting to be adorned with grand mosques, yet it still had something of the frontier town about it with many of its Turkish inhabitants still living in tents. Constantinople was still a cultural and commercial metropolis to which the Turks looked enviously, and the Byzantine tradition in architecture and the decorative arts was to have a profound impact on Ottoman material culture.¹⁹

In view of the closeness with which Byzantine and Ottoman societies functioned and interacted, it is hardly surprising that there were some Byzantines who were unhappy about any confrontation with the Turks. These were after all people with whom they dealt on an everyday basis, and needless hostilities would interrupt commercial relations. An outright Turkish victory in any war would spell disaster for Byzantine lives and property. Manuel II soon discovered this point of view on the occasions when he openly defied the Turkish sultan. During the 1380s when he was in Thessalonica he became deeply frustrated with what he considered to be the lack of patriotism among the inhabitants, complaining angrily in a letter:

They have to be convinced . . . that it is nobler and far less shameful to suffer willingly the lot of slaves for the sake of their own freedom than, after having become slaves, to try and gain the rights of free men.²⁰

Manuel did not succeed in persuading them, however, and in 1387 they voluntarily opened their gates to the Turks. The same thing happened during Bayezid's siege of Constantinople in 1394–1402. As the years went by and there was no sign of relief, more and more voices were raised in favour of surrender. After all, if Bayezid took Constantinople by storm, the city and everything in it would be given over to plunder. If, on the other hand, some negotiated settlement were reached whereby the city was handed over peacefully to the sultan, then its inhabitants might be able to keep their property and fortunes under the new regime. The defeat of the crusade at Nicopolis in 1396 was the last straw. People started to escape from the beleaguered city by night, letting themselves down by ropes from the Land Walls and giving themselves up to the Turks.²¹

John VII seems to some extent to have been the spokesman for the advocates of accommodation, just as in the 1380s Manuel II had repre-

sented those who favoured resistance to the Ottomans. Unlike Manuel, John was on friendly terms with Sultan Bayezid, who provided him with military support for his coup in 1390. When he was left in charge of Constantinople between 1399 and 1402 John VII faithfully fulfilled his duty, but after two years with no visible fruit of his uncle's diplomacy in the west he initiated talks with Bayezid. In August 1401 a Byzantine embassy set out from Constantinople to Bursa. Bayezid was absent on campaign in the east so the ambassadors discussed terms with one of his wives, the mother of Suleyman. These negotiations seem to have resulted in an agreement that if Bayezid was victorious in his forthcoming campaign against Timur, John would hand over the city of Constantinople and continue to rule it on payment of an annual tribute to the sultan. The agreement was rendered null and void by the turn of events, and John was left to face the wrath of his returning uncle.²²

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So the strife among members of the Palaiologos family was not only a squabble for power. There were wider issues at stake such as the economic interests of some of Constantinople's leading citizens and the question of whether to resist the Turks or to find an accommodation with them. Even so, however great the bitterness of the antagonism between Manuel II and John VII, the quarrel among the Palaiologoi was by no means an unbridgeable gulf in late Byzantine society.

For one thing, as with all political alignments and policies, the lines of demarcation were not fixed and rigid. It would be quite wrong to characterise John VII as 'pro-Ottoman' for he was prepared to talk to anyone to advance his cause. He sought to save Constantinople from disaster during Bayezid's siege not only by negotiating with the sultan but also by offering to surrender the city first to the king of France and then to Timur. He was even prepared to support

Manuel II's initiative of seeking help from the Latin west against Bayezid, at one point writing to the king of England to reinforce his uncle's appeal. Just as the policies of John VII were not rigid, neither were the allegiances of his supporters. Nicholas Notaras, the businessman and supporter of John VII who has already been mentioned, was later prepared actively to back Manuel II's policy of defying Bayezid. In 1397 he went to Italy as Manuel's ambassador and organised the collection of 500 ducats in donations for the relief of Constantinople in the city of Siena, before moving on to Paris and possibly London, presumably on the same errand. Demetrius Chrysoloras, who was clearly an adherent of John VII, remained on very good terms with Manuel II, exchanging letters with him and visiting him in Constantinople.²³

Moreover, as events turned out, in spite of all the dire predictions of observers, the struggle between Manuel II and John VII was not resumed in the years after 1403. Manuel and John governed in their respective cities of Constantinople and Thessalonica without coming into conflict. This might have been at least partly thanks to Demetrius Chrysoloras. Appointed as first minister to John VII, he acted as a go-between in negotiations between uncle and nephew. Apart from rivalry for the throne, there was now less to divide the two parties. After 1403 there were several years of peace with the Ottoman Turks, so that the question of how to respond to the threat no longer seemed such a burning issue.

Then, on 22 September 1408, John VII unexpectedly died.²⁴ Since John's infant son Andronicus seems also to have died by this time, the dynastic complications that had dogged the empire since 1373 were resolved, for now there was no question as to who would succeed Manuel. There was no one else apart from his own sons. Manuel had provided very well for the succession. In 1403 he had three potential heirs in the persons of John, Theodore and Andronicus. In late middle

age he went on to father three more sons, Constantine, born in 1405, Demetrius, born in 1406, and the youngest, Thomas, who arrived in 1409. As the eldest, John was his designated successor as emperor and for the other two older sons Manuel followed the by now standard practice of providing appanages. When his younger brother Theodore died in June 1407, Manuel installed his second son, also Theodore, as Despot of the Morea at Mistra. When John VII died a year later, Manuel's third son Andronicus became the ruler of Thessalonica with the title of despot. Because Andronicus was still underage, the veteran soldier Demetrius Laskaris Leontaris stayed on in the city to act as his mentor. Five years after his return to Constantinople, therefore, Manuel II had some cause for satisfaction. The empire was reviving economically and the dynastic rivalry that had dogged it for over forty years had at last been resolved.²⁵

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Even as one cause of division subsided, however, another was growing. Manuel II's decision to appeal to the west during Bayezid's siege had reopened an old debate over relations with the Catholic Church and the Latins in general. It was not the theological or ecclesiastical questions behind the schism that made the issue so troublesome. Most people were happy to leave such matters to dry theologians and clerics. What raised the passions of the Byzantine population were memories of a catastrophic event that had taken place some two hundred years before. In the early days of April 1204, a Venetian fleet had been anchored in the Golden Horn. The fleet had originally set out from Venice with a large army of French knights on board as part of the Fourth Crusade to conquer Egypt from the Saracens. It had never reached Egypt, but had diverted to Constantinople to give support to one of the parties in a power struggle among the then Byzantine royal family, the Angeloi.

When their candidate was overthrown and murdered, the French and Venetians considered themselves to have been insulted and betrayed. They had mounted a full-scale attack on the Sea Walls and after four days of fighting they had breached the defences and stormed into Constantinople. The ensuing sack was efficient and brutal, but what really shocked the Byzantines was the way that this supposedly Christian army behaved towards the city's churches, which were systematically looted and pillaged. The Latin troops broke into the cathedral of Hagia Sophia and seized the communion vessels and silver lamps. They were even said to have desecrated the altar. A Byzantine priest described how they rushed through the streets:

pillaging the holy places, trampling on divine things, running riot over holy things, casting down to the floor the holy images of Christ and His holy Mother and of the holy men who from eternity have been pleasing to the Lord God, uttering calumnies and profanities . . .²⁶

In diverting to Constantinople and in attacking and sacking the city, the crusaders had been acting without any authority or encouragement from the Pope. Nevertheless, with the city in their hands, they presented their victory as a resolution of the schism. They proceeded to elect one of their number as emperor and brought in a Venetian cleric as patriarch to impose the Catholic rite on the churches of the city. Given the way that reunion had been imposed, few Byzantines were prepared to accept it, fleeing to centres of resistance at Nicaea and Artá. Constantinople remained under Latin rule until 1261 when Manuel II's ancestor, Michael VIII Palaiologos (r.1259–1282) retook the city and restored an Orthodox patriarch to Hagia Sophia.

It was memories of those events that had so embittered Byzantine relations with the west. As even the Pope had to admit, many

Byzantines subsequently regarded the Latins as ‘an example of affliction and the works of Hell’ whom they detested ‘more than dogs’. One of the Pope’s bishops advised him as follows:

Know this for the fact, that a difference of dogma does not so much remove the hearts of the Greeks from you as the hatred which has entered into their spirit against the Latins, as a consequence of the great many evils which the Greeks have suffered from the Latins at diverse times and are still suffering day by day. Unless this hatred is first removed, union will not be possible . . .²⁷

The bitter memories did not fade over the years. Western travellers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were often shocked at the hostility that they encountered from the Byzantine population. A Dominican monk living in Pera complained that some Byzantines would break a cup out of which a Latin had drunk rather than risk contamination by using it again. One Burgundian traveller, Bertrandon de la Brocquière, experienced that hostility at first hand. When crossing the Bosphorus from Skoutari to Pera in 1432, the Byzantines who rowed him accorded him great respect at first because they thought that he was a Turk. When they found out that he was, in fact, a Latin, they decided to put up the fare and became very aggressive when their passenger refused to pay up. There probably would have been a fight, had a Genoese shoemaker who lived near the gate in Pera’s walls not come to Bertrandon’s aid. The aggrieved traveller concluded his tale with this sombre caveat:

I mention this as a warning to travellers who, like me, may have anything to do with the Greeks. All those with whom I have had any concerns have only made me more suspicious, for I have found more probity in the Turks. These people love not the Christians of the Roman persuasion.²⁸

Besides memories of 1204, there was another factor that was deepening the estrangement between Byzantine east and Latin west. The two Churches had also been developing theologically along very different lines in the centuries since the initial break. In western Europe, the Catholic Church had adopted a rational, natural theology, largely thanks to the efforts of Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274). In the Byzantine world, by contrast, a strain of mystical theology had come to the fore, under the influence of what has come to be termed ‘hesychasm’. This was a set of teachings which stressed that the highest goal of the believer was constant inward prayer, achieved with techniques like controlled breathing and constant repetition of a mantra, usually the name of Christ, the so-called ‘Jesus Prayer’. Those who followed this path claimed that they had on occasion experienced an ecstatic state in which they had received a vision of the divine, uncreated light that had shone around Christ during the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. Human reason played no part in this experience, which was simply a gift of God. By the mid-fourteenth century, hesychast practices and teachings were widespread among the monks and hermits of Mount Athos.

Such mystical ideas were nothing new in the Byzantine Church. Descriptions of them are found in the works of earlier mystics and saints, but they had suddenly leapt to prominence in Constantinople in 1334 when a monk called Barlaam of Calabria had publicly denounced hesychast practices as irrational and superstitious. The theological controversy that ensued was long and bitter, as hesychasm found its champion and defender in the Athonite monk Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), the future Archbishop of Thessalonica. The dispute was officially resolved in 1351 when a synod was convened in the Palace of Blachernae to give a final ruling on the matter. It found in favour of Palamas and the hesychasts, ruling that their teachings and practices were entirely orthodox, and threatened anyone who disagreed with excommunication. Hesychasm thus became part of the dogma of

the Orthodox Church, giving it a very different theological complexion to that of the Catholic west.

The divide was not just between east and west. It also cut across Byzantine society. Some Byzantines were deeply unhappy about Palamite theology and hesychast practices, and these tended to be intellectuals who found the irrational simplicities of ecstatic religious experience deeply distasteful. Foremost among them was a courtier named Demetrius Kydones (c.1324–c.1398). As part of his diplomatic duties, Kydones had learned Latin and he embarked upon the onerous task of translating the *Summa Contra Gentiles* of Thomas Aquinas from Latin into Greek. The *Summa* contained a complete summary of the theology of the Catholic Church, and here Kydones found the kind of rational and enlightened religion that was a world away from the monks of Athos and their visions. As he recorded in his autobiography, Kydones suddenly realised that the Latin theological tradition might be superior to that in which he had been raised:

I had tasted of the Lotus and could not resist any longer. I saturated myself with the language of Latium; and whenever people came into possession of anything written in Latin, they immediately brought it to me. . . . Now it would become apparent that the Latins too had people capable of the highest intellectual attainments.

Kydones subsequently emerged as the centre of a circle of like-minded individuals who, in stark contrast to so many of their compatriots, deeply admired the religion and culture of the Catholic west. Some even went so far as to compare their own culture and civilisation unfavourably with that of the west, and particularly Italy.²⁹

At this stage, the division between the pro-Latin and pro-Palamite elements did not make a deep impact. Kydones's followers constituted only a very small group among the wider population and their numbers

were soon to dwindle. As far as the ecclesiastical authorities were concerned, adoption of Latin theology and opposition to Palamism was tantamount to heresy, and the patriarch of Constantinople initiated a series of crackdowns. Kydones himself was too prominent at court, so the patriarch went for his brother, the priest Prochoros Kydones. Hauled before a synod of hostile bishops in the spring of 1368, Prochoros was closely cross-examined over his anti-Palamite writings, found guilty of heresy, deprived of his priesthood and excommunicated. Other known associates of Demetrius Kydones were required to sign a profession of faith and thus affirm their loyalty to Orthodoxy or face similar excommunication. Some signed, others felt compelled to burn their boats and convert to Catholicism. One day in 1390, when John VII was in control of Constantinople, a young man named Maximus Chrysovergis, who had read Aquinas in Kydones's translation, had himself rowed across the Golden Horn to Pera where he became a Dominican monk. He was followed in 1396 by a schoolmaster, Manuel Kalekas, who took the same route over to Pera and into the arms of the Dominicans. Kydones himself also began to feel the heat in Constantinople. He spent most of his latter years in Italy where he became a Catholic. When he died during the winter of 1397–8, he left the pro-Latin faction leaderless for the time being.³⁰

Meanwhile events were taking a turn that would suddenly make the views of Kydones and his successors influential at the Byzantine court. The period of vassaldom to the Ottoman sultan came to an end and Bayezid was encamped with his army outside the Land Walls. Manuel II and his advisers took the decision to make an appeal for help to the Latin west, but they knew the problems that it would involve. They were, after all, going to seek help from the descendants of the men who had sacked Constantinople in 1204, whose religious faith most Byzantines considered to be heretical. They were well aware of the need for caution. Manuel emphatically ruled out any discussions to resolve

the schism as they would, he said, only deepen the disagreement.³¹ He knew too that any such attempt was likely to meet with deep opposition from a large section of his own people, for it had already been tried. His ancestor Michael VIII had agreed to reunion of the Churches on Roman terms at the Council of Lyon back in 1274 in the hope of fending off Latin attempts to recapture Constantinople. There had been bitter opposition to the move in Byzantium and following Michael's death in 1282 the Union of Lyon had been quietly abrogated on the Byzantine side. That was why Manuel II had decided to appeal directly to the sympathy of western rulers during his travels in 1399–1403, avoiding the rival popes in Rome and Avignon.

That approach did not solve the problem entirely, for grassroots hostility towards Latins remained and could be extremely embarrassing. A few years after Manuel II's return to Constantinople in 1403, he received a letter from Henry IV of England, who had been his host in London in 1400–1. Henry complained to Manuel that he had received disturbing reports about Latin Christians in Constantinople being ill-treated by the emperor's subjects. He asked Manuel to investigate and to intervene. It was this kind of incident that probably made the emperor realise that he needed the pro-Latin followers of Demetrius Kydones. He himself was not one of them. Although Kydones had been his tutor when he was young and the two men remained friends to the end of Kydones's life, Manuel's Orthodox convictions were unshakeable. He was the author of a theological treatise on the procession of the Holy Ghost, one of the issues that divided the eastern and western Churches, in which he emphatically championed the Orthodox view. He deeply disapproved of those Byzantines who converted to Catholicism. When news arrived of the conversion of Manuel Kalekas in 1396, he asked himself dryly whether the Dominicans had offered him anything material as an inducement 'for

they usually honour newcomers who change over more than they might deserve'.³²

Whatever his personal views, Manuel needed men who could build bridges with the Latins, and Kydones and his followers had always been strident advocates of seeking western help against the Turks. As early as the 1360s, Kydones had made a passionate speech in which he urged the Byzantines to think of the Latins not as enemies or aliens but as fellow Romans and fellow Christians and to accept their aid against the common, Muslim enemy. He had been involved in an early attempt at rapprochement, accompanying John V to Rome in 1369 when the Byzantine emperor made his personal submission to the Pope. By the time of Bayezid's siege, Kydones was elderly and living away from Constantinople, so he was not in a position to be of much help in Manuel II's western diplomatic offensive. Instead the emperor cultivated the friendship and esteem of Kydones's pupil and follower, Manuel Chrysoloras (d. 1415), a relative of the Demetrius Chrysoloras who had supported John VII so loyally. Like Kydones, Chrysoloras had an excellent knowledge of Latin and was therefore an ideal choice as an envoy to the Pope and Catholic sovereigns. He was to spend most of his later years in the west as Manuel II's acceptable, pro-Latin representative.³³

For the same reason, the emperor cultivated a number of Italian intellectuals who spent time in Constantinople to learn ancient Greek. Guarino da Verona (1374–1460), who had studied under Manuel Chrysoloras in the 1390s, was there between 1403 and 1408 when he acted as Manuel's secretary. The Milanese Francesco Filelfo (1389–1481) worked in the same capacity for the Venetian bailey between 1420 and 1427. During their stay both men lodged either with Manuel Chrysoloras or with his nephew, John Chrysoloras. They seem to have enjoyed their time in Constantinople. Guarino always fondly recalled his days there, while Filelfo ended up marrying John Chrysoloras's daughter, Theodora. Both men maintained friendly links

with Byzantium after their return to Italy. Manuel II corresponded with Guarino while Filelfo remained in contact with pro-Latin Byzantines such as John Chrysoloras and George Scholarios. Both Guarino and Filelfo became active advocates of the Byzantine cause in the west. Guarino was later involved in the discussions between the Byzantine and Latin delegations at the Council of Ferrara/Florence in 1438–9. As for Filelfo, although he was a cantankerous individual, much given to snide remarks about the Greeks, he nevertheless worked hard to persuade western rulers to take military action against the Turks.³⁴

The cultivation of Latins and pro-Latins at the Byzantine court under Manuel II had a noticeable side effect. It led to a much greater knowledge about the history and culture of western Europe and opened the way for aspects of Latin cultural influence. All the indications suggest that before the late fourteenth century, even those Byzantines who moved in court and intellectual circles were extremely ignorant of and indifferent to the peoples and countries that lay beyond the Alps. Even one of the foremost Byzantine minds, Nikephoros Gregoras (c.1293–c.1361), could find no more to say about the 1346 French defeat at Crécy in his monumental history of his own times than: ‘The Britons crossed over to the mainland of the Celts and there was a great battle.’ Now, all of a sudden, northern Europe was fashionable in court circles in Constantinople and everyone wanted to know about it. When the Burgundian traveller Bertrandon de la Brocquière arrived in Constantinople in 1432, he found himself questioned eagerly about the latest news from home. The Byzantines particularly wanted to know about the execution of Joan of Arc that had taken place the previous year and whether it had really been Bertrandon’s master, the Duke of Burgundy, who had handed her over to the English, something that his questioners found very difficult to believe.³⁵

Information on western Europe was not only carried to Constantinople by travellers like Bertrandon. It would also have been brought back by Byzantines returning from diplomatic trips there, such as Manuel II and his retinue or Manuel Chrysoloras. While he was in Paris in 1401–3, the emperor wrote a detailed account of the removal of the papacy to Avignon during the fourteenth century in his theological treatise on the procession of the Holy Ghost, information that he is likely to have picked up during his stay. He also recorded the favourable impression that England had made on him, describing the country as a second ‘Oikoumene’, by which he probably meant that it was like Byzantium had been in the days of its greatness. Information brought back by Manuel II and his retinue may also have provided the basis for a detailed description of western Europe that appears in the work of a later Greek writer and which discusses, among other matters, the Hundred Years War, the English wool trade and the reconquest of Spain from the Moors.³⁶

This pro-Latin atmosphere in Byzantine court circles resulted not only in better information about the Latin west but also a discernible cultural influence, just as was the case with the Ottomans. The spoken Greek language had already adopted numerous Italian loan words and western influence can be traced in other areas. Manuscripts of Byzantine liturgical chant from the early fifteenth century show some debt to western polyphony, perhaps heard by some clergyman who had accompanied John V to Rome in 1369. Churches that were built at Mistra in this period reflect western architecture in a way that Byzantine buildings never had before. The church of the monastery of the Pantanassa, which was completed in 1428, was provided with a belfry, pointed Gothic arches and tracery decoration on the exterior – all features of western rather than Byzantine style.³⁷

At the end of the day, however, despite this enthusiasm for all things Latin among a small group of intellectuals and courtiers, it was not

shared by most of the Byzantine population and certainly not by the monks of Mount Athos and the dedicated followers of the teachings of Gregory Palamas. For most, whatever the emperor might say about the need for help against the Ottomans, the Latins remained the perpetrators of the 1204 sack of Constantinople and the holders of dangerous and heretical opinions. The monk Symeon, who later became archbishop of Thessalonica (1416/17–29), showed no such openness to western influence, inveighing against the incorrect way that western artists portrayed the saints:

Whereas the holy icons have been piously established in honour of their divine prototypes . . . these men, who subvert everything, as has been said, often confect holy images in a different manner and one that is contrary to custom.³⁸

Like the question of how to deal with the Turks, the fissure was present but dormant in 1403. It was to rise to the surface when the quarrels among the Palaiologoi were renewed in the next generation.



To the Brink

ALTHOUGH THE DOWNFALL of Bayezid had removed the immediate danger to Constantinople, Manuel II and his advisers were not so naïve as to think that they were safe. Their main fear at the beginning of 1403 was that they had merely exchanged one powerful enemy for another. There was a well-grounded apprehension that Timur would not stop in Asia Minor but would find a way to cross to Europe and strike at Bayezid's son Suleyman in Adrianople. Once in Europe, there would be nothing to prevent Timur from swinging his forces round and marching on Constantinople. The fate of Smyrna the previous December was an indication of what treatment it could expect at his hands. The threat was taken seriously enough for a clause to be written into the Byzantine treaty with Suleyman to the effect that the Ottoman emir would provide sailors and galleys to help defend Constantinople if Timur decided to attack the city.¹ In the end, Ottoman help was not required for the danger receded in the spring of 1403 when Timur took the decision to withdraw his army from Asia Minor and return to Samarkand. The terror he had inspired lingered until, on 17 March 1405, the great conqueror died. With Timur gone, the greatest fear in ruling circles in Constantinople was that the power of the Ottomans would revive and that an ambitious and aggressive sultan would reunite

the empire that had been dismembered after the defeat at Ankara. In the face of this possibility, Manuel II resorted to three approaches. Two achieved modest success. The third brought Byzantium to the brink of disaster.

In the first place, even though the situation was no longer as grave as it had been, Manuel continued the diplomatic offensive that he had begun during the siege of 1394–1402. Once more the aim was to secure the military support of the powers of the west by capitalising on the sympathy of fellow Christians for those oppressed by a common Muslim foe. After all, even though the emperor's visit to the west in 1399–1403 had not yielded much in the way of tangible help for Constantinople, he had been very warmly and sympathetically received and he sought now to build on that by despatching a wave of ambassadors to western courts. At the forefront of the offensive was the pro-Latin pupil and follower of Demetrius Kydones, Manuel Chrysoloras. Chrysoloras had already played a leading part in Manuel's western diplomacy during Bayezid's siege, and a spell teaching at the University of Florence in 1397–1400 had secured him valuable contacts and a wide reputation for erudition. Now Chrysoloras set off on his travels again and between 1404 and 1415 he toured Europe indefatigably, spending time in Italy, France, England, Spain and Germany, urging their rulers to send help to Constantinople. He was still abroad when he died in 1415 and his last resting place was at Constance in Switzerland. Other envoys were sent to Barcelona and Rome in 1404–5, to France and Spain in 1404–9, and to Hungary, Poland and Lithuania in 1420.²

These ambassadors carried out their task with some skill using a variety of methods to evoke the sympathy of their hosts. As well as emotional appeals, there were carefully chosen diplomatic gifts. King Martin I of Aragon (r.1396–1410) received a collection of relics of the saints. The royal abbey of St Denis near Paris was presented with a fine

manuscript of the works attributed to Dionysios the Areopagite, the Athenian judge who had been converted by St Paul. These objects were more than just expensive presents. They emphasised Constantinople's status as a holy place, which it was the duty of all Christians to defend. Judicious flattery was used to the same end. In 1405, when some Byzantine envoys happened to meet a travelling Welshman in Rome, they reminded him that the founder of Constantinople, Constantine the Great, had been proclaimed emperor in Britain in A.D. 306. They even claimed that when Constantine left the island he took 30,000 Britons with him and that their descendants were still in Constantinople to that day. Such an appeal to dubious kinship was no doubt aimed at trumping the rift caused by the schism.³

Skilful though the ambassadors were, they were not successful in eliciting large-scale western military assistance for Constantinople in this period, much to Manuel's disappointment. When he received a discouraging despatch from Chrysoloras in 1409, he lamented that:

It contained nothing at all of what we were hoping for. And even great promises would not have been enough. For now there is need of deeds which will bring help, and not of words and promises which have been the usual thing for so long.⁴

Even so, there were some concrete returns for their efforts. Small but welcome sums of money were donated to the ambassadors by concerned Christians who wanted to contribute to the defence of Constantinople. Indulgences were issued by the popes to encourage Catholics to participate in the defence of the Byzantine empire. These must have provided incentives for individuals like Welshman Sir Hugh Johnys, who was later to spend five years as a soldier in Byzantine service before going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.⁵ Manuel II's greatest diplomatic success in the west was the clinching of two marriage

alliances. They were by no means easy to arrange and only happened after protracted negotiations. The Pope had to be persuaded to issue a bull permitting Catholic princesses to marry members of the Palaiologos family, provided that no attempt was made to convert them to Orthodoxy. Finally, in January 1421, Manuel's eldest son John was married to Sophia, the daughter of Marquis Theodore II of Montferrat (r.1381–1418), his first wife Anna of Moscow having died in 1417. Manuel's second son, the Despot Theodore II, was married to Cleope, daughter of Carlo Malatesta, count of Rimini (r.1368–1429). These matches with Italian nobility were not particularly glittering, but for princes of the shrunken Byzantine empire they were not bad. The marquises of Montferrat in northern Italy had long-standing family ties with the Palaiologoi going back to the twelfth century, and the marriage would have helped to keep them as allies and advocates. The counts of Rimini were renowned as *condottieri*, or mercenaries, and the position of their lands across the Adriatic placed them in a good position to come to the aid of the Byzantine Peloponnese.⁶ So even though no full-scale military help was forthcoming, Byzantine diplomacy in the west at this time was not just a series of plaintive appeals that were studiously ignored.

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A second preoccupation in the years after 1403 was building up the fortifications of the tiny empire. They had played a vital role in Byzantium's survival in the face of Bayezid's onslaught between 1394 and 1402 and there was now a perfect opportunity to repair and extend them. Not surprisingly, Byzantine emperors had always been careful to keep the Land Walls of Constantinople in good condition and to strengthen them whenever possible, but that had become difficult in the later fourteenth century. Sultan Bayezid, no doubt already contemplating an attack on

Constantinople, had interpreted any such work as an unfriendly act and had taken drastic action to prevent it. Manuel II's father, John V, had added to the Land Walls by building a fortress at the southern end over the Golden Gate. It had proved extremely useful in 1376 and 1390 when John had used it as a refuge during the coups staged by Andronicus IV and John VII. Bayezid had decided that it made his vassal too secure and in 1391 had demanded that it be demolished. He gave teeth to his ultimatum by threatening to kill Manuel, who was at that time in the sultan's camp, if John V failed to comply. The fortress came down.⁷

With Bayezid gone and his successor Suleyman not in a strong enough position to object, Manuel had a good opportunity to reinforce and fortify. The best opportunity for him to do so seemed to be in the Peloponnese. Not only was it now the wealthiest part of Manuel's empire but it was also the easiest to defend thanks to two remarkable geographical features. One was the Isthmus of Corinth, which links the Peloponnese to the rest of Greece and is only six kilometres across at its widest point. Any invading army would have to pass through this narrow spit of land, which could easily be fortified and defended. That was exactly what the ancient Greeks had done in 480 B.C. when menaced with invasion by the army of the Persian king, Xerxes. They had hastily constructed a wall across the Isthmus, although it was never put to the test as the Persians did not advance that far. The isthmian fortifications had been rebuilt and extended under Emperor Justinian in the sixth century A.D. but by 1403 they had fallen into disrepair and had largely disappeared.

That did not apply to the fortification on the second geographical feature, which lay a few kilometres to the south of the Isthmus. Rising precipitously from the landscape stood the Acrocorinth, a towering limestone mountain that acted as the citadel of ancient Corinth and was one of the finest natural fortresses in Europe:

The Acrocorinth is wholly impregnable, built on the lofty summit of the hill and fortified by very strong walls. The place is very high and steep, with precipices all around it, and there is only one approach. . . . It itself is steep, and enclosed and fortified by a triple wall.⁸

Those walls ran for two kilometres, enclosing some 148 hectares (60 acres), and had been kept in good repair by generations of Byzantines and French crusaders. The Acrocorinth commanded the road into the Peloponnese and its possession was vital for anyone who wanted to hold the peninsula securely.

Unfortunately, in 1403, the Byzantines possessed neither the Isthmus nor the Acrocorinth. Manuel II's brother, the Despot Theodore, had held Corinth and its citadel for a few years in the past, having bought it from Carlo I Tocco, count of Cephalonia and duke of Leukas, but in the dark days of the late 1390s he had despaired of being able to hold even the Acrocorinth against Bayezid. So in 1400 he had sold it along with the city of Corinth to the Knights of St John. Now with Bayezid overthrown, Manuel and Theodore were anxious to recover this strategic asset and they entered into negotiations with the Knights. As it happened, the Order was perfectly happy to relinquish the Acrocorinth. Their rule there and in other parts of the Morea had met with entrenched opposition from the anti-Latin local Greek population, and they were anxious to withdraw. An agreement was reached on 5 May 1404 with the treaty of Vasilipotamos by which Manuel II and Theodore bought back the town and fortress for the sum of 46,500 gold ducats. Just over a month later, Theodore took possession of the Acrocorinth.⁹

The way was now open for building up the defence of what had become the jewel in the Byzantine emperor's threadbare crown, for possession of Corinth effectively gave the Byzantines control of the Isthmus as well. Manuel planned to rebuild the wall that had once

stood there but he knew that he would have to act quickly before the Ottomans had time to object. In March 1415 the emperor arrived in person at the port of Kenchreai near Corinth to oversee the initial work. During April the basic structure of the wall was laid out with two dismantled forts at either end being rebuilt. Over the next two years, a wall some 3,800 metres long was erected, punctuated by 153 towers and known as the Hexamilion, or 'six miles long'. With this set of walls blocking the Isthmus, it must have seemed that the Peloponnese was now as secure as Constantinople itself.¹⁰

It was not only static defence that occupied Manuel in the years after 1413. He also went on the offensive against rebellious subjects in various parts of his empire. For that he needed troops, but he does not seem to have had a large army at his disposal in Constantinople. Like his predecessors, he employed a small standing army of mercenaries and he raised enough troops in this way to garrison the walls of the capital, but it is unlikely that these soldiers could have been taken away to engage on counter-insurgency elsewhere. Fortunately, there were greater military resources in the Peloponnese where there was land available to be granted in return for military service and where reserves of population were much greater than those of Constantinople. In around 1395 some 10,000 Albanians had arrived with their families and cattle at the Isthmus of Corinth. The Despot Theodore had welcomed them and invited them to settle on Byzantine land to the south, and so considerably boosted the manpower at his disposal. One Italian observer was impressed by the size of the army in the Morea and guessed it to number 10,000 cavalry and 5,000 archers in 1417, which was a not inconsiderable army by medieval standards.¹¹

It may well have been with troops raised from the Peloponnese that Manuel left Constantinople in July 1414 with a fleet of six ships bound for the island of Thasos. It would appear that the island had broken away from Byzantine rule and thrown in its lot with the Genoese

Gattilusi of the island of Lesbos. The issue was resolved in a three-month siege during which Manuel battered his enemies' fortified positions with stone-throwing catapults. By September the island was once more under his authority. The following year Manuel was in the Morea to deal with a revolt staged by the nobles, or *archons*. On 15 July 1415 he fought a pitched battle and decisively worsted the rebels, going on to storm their principal fortress at Mantinea and bring the episode to a victorious conclusion. Scholar and theologian Manuel may have been in his spare time, but he could act very decisively when the moment required.¹²

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The third strategy deployed by Manuel II after 1403 was what might be termed 'war by other means'. It was by no means new. Hundreds of years before Manuel II was born, the Byzantine princess and historian Anna Komnene (1083–c.1148) had given her opinion that in war 'a general's supreme task is to win, not merely by force of arms, but also by relying on treaties, and there is another way – sometimes, in the right circumstances, an enemy can be beaten by fraud'.¹³ When she wrote these words, the Byzantine empire was still powerful enough to field a large army and defeat its enemies in open war, but its rulers had still preferred where possible to deal with their enemies by other means. One of their favourite stratagems was exploiting the internal differences among their enemies, and the situation after 1403 provided ample opportunity for that.

The downfall of Bayezid had plunged the Ottoman ruling family into a titanic struggle for the succession that made the Byzantines' own dynastic problems look tiny by comparison. The Ottomans were even more susceptible to such conflicts because of their rules of succession to the sultanate. Like all medieval Muslim rulers, the Ottoman sultans

had numerous wives and a similar number of concubines. Since there was no concept of primogeniture among the Turks, in theory any son of a reigning sultan was entitled to succeed him, whether he was born to a wife or to a concubine. Consequently, there was always a considerable number of claimants. That did not necessarily lead to civil war every time a sultan died. Usually one son was clearly a favourite and the advisers of the previous sultan saw to it that he was in the right place to succeed when the time came. The unexpected defeat and capture of Bayezid by Timur at Ankara in 1402, and his subsequent death, meant that the carefully choreographed transfer of power did not happen and there was a rush by his surviving sons to seize what they could of their inheritance.

At first it looked as if Bayezid's eldest son, Suleyman, was in the strongest position. In the aftermath of the battle of Ankara, he had fled across the Dardanelles to Adrianople and had established himself as the ruler of the European section of the Ottoman empire. The eastern provinces in Asia Minor on the other hand were lost to him, for they were occupied by Timur's army. When Timur withdrew in the spring of 1403, two of Suleyman's brothers emerged from hiding to fill the vacuum. One, Mehmed, established himself in the area around Amasya, while another, Isa, carved out a domain for himself in western Asia Minor around the old Ottoman capital of Bursa. There were other claimants too. Yusuf and Mustafa were lying low waiting for their chance. The youngest of the brothers, Musa, who was still a minor, was effectively the prisoner of Mehmed at Amasya.¹⁴ It was in the interest of Byzantium that this situation should last as long as possible, because as long as it did none of the brothers would be able to threaten Constantinople. So the Byzantines fished in the troubled waters of Ottoman dynastic rivalry as often as they could to ensure that no one Ottoman prince succeeded in coming out on top and reuniting the domains of Bayezid. For a long time they succeeded in doing exactly that.

The inevitable Ottoman civil war broke out in the spring of 1403 with Mehmed and Isa contesting the mastery of Asia Minor. Mehmed defeated Isa near Lake Ulubat and Isa fled to Constantinople where John VII, still standing in for the absent Manuel, gave him asylum. An outright victory for Mehmed would not be in Byzantine interests so Isa was sheltered until he was ready to return to the fray. Crossing back to Asia Minor, Isa challenged Mehmed again. Once more defeated, he fled to Eskişehir where he was captured and strangled. That left Mehmed effectively master of Asia Minor. He took possession of Bursa and staged a public funeral for his father, thus openly stating his claim to be the heir of the great Bayezid.¹⁵

A clear rival to Suleyman had emerged in Asia Minor and the contest looked likely to become a two-horse race. Suleyman could not let such a direct challenge go unpunished. In the autumn of 1403, not long after the downfall of Isa, Suleyman crossed to Asia Minor and marched on Bursa. Hopelessly outnumbered, Mehmed abandoned the city and withdrew to Ankara. There he holed himself up in the city's fortress and defied all attempts by Suleyman to dislodge him. The result was six years of stalemate with Suleyman in control of western Asia Minor but unable to loosen Mehmed's grip on the Anatolian plateau. From the Byzantine point of view there could be no better outcome.

Eventually the deadlock was broken, but only when Mehmed resorted to alternative means in an attempt to defeat his elder brother Suleyman. At some point in 1409 Mehmed released his younger brother Musa, whom he had kept confined, and allowed him to cross to Europe to challenge Suleyman on his own ground. Musa headed across the Black Sea for the small Christian principality of Wallachia to the north of the River Danube in the hope that its ruler would lend his support. In this situation, given that Suleyman still appeared the most likely candidate to win the civil war, it is probable that Manuel II initially gave some support to Musa. He may have hoped that the

contest between Suleyman and Musa would end up with the same kind of stalemate as prevailed in Asia Minor.

Musa's presence in the Balkans forced Suleyman to give up his attempt to subdue Asia Minor, and Mehmed, and brought him hurrying back towards Europe. At this point Byzantine policy began to waver somewhat and in spite of his early support for Musa, Manuel now switched to endorsing Suleyman. The latter visited the emperor in Constantinople to request his help and may well have outbid his younger brother with promises of territorial concessions. He may even have proffered the coveted town of Gallipoli, which commanded the Dardanelles. Whatever the agreement was, Byzantine ships helped to ferry Suleyman's troops across the straits to Europe to join their leader. At first it looked as if Manuel had backed a winner. In June 1410 Suleyman drove Musa's army away from the walls of Constantinople and then trounced it at Adrianople a month later. In spite of these reverses, Musa persevered and he counter-attacked with new forces in February the following year. Suleyman might still have prevailed but he was by all accounts a rather indolent individual, much given to banquets and heavy drinking bouts. He failed to take action in time to prevent Musa's advance and many of his troops deserted him. He was assassinated under rather mysterious circumstances, probably by a member of his own retinue, and Musa was left in control of Adrianople and the European part of the Ottoman empire.¹⁶

It was now that the dangers of meddling in Ottoman affairs made themselves apparent. The Byzantines found themselves confronted with a hostile and vengeful Ottoman ruler controlling the land outside the walls of Constantinople for the first time since Musa's father Bayezid in 1402. Musa was in no mood to forgive the Byzantines for the support they had given to his rival and, in the summer of 1411, he sent his armies in simultaneous attacks against Constantinople, Selymbria and Thessalonica. The archbishop of Thessalonica, Symeon, fulminated

against what he considered to be Musa's treachery in turning on the Byzantines:

He broke every promise that he had made with his heathen oaths, and in this manner acted in a manner worthy of his polluted and deceitful religion; he then turned against the pious emperor who had assisted him, and against Constantinople, that most Christian city.¹⁷

It is unlikely that the good archbishop was familiar with the details of the opportunistic policy that Manuel II had pursued.

Musa's attacks were punitive raids rather than serious attempts to take the Byzantine cities. The main tactic of his troops was to pillage the countryside round about and to blockade the defensive walls. In Constantinople, Manuel was forced to make what military response he could. When Musa gathered some ships and tried to mount a naval blockade as well, a flotilla was sent against his fleet under the command of the emperor's illegitimate brother, also called Manuel. This force succeeded in driving the attackers off by sea, but the land blockade remained in place. As the summer wore on and there was no sign of any let-up, the defenders started making sorties through the gates in the Land Walls against the Turkish lines. On one such occasion a Byzantine attacker, named John Notaras, became cut off from his comrades and was captured. The Turks then dragged him to within view of the defenders on the Land Walls and hacked off his head, leaving his body lying in no-man's-land. Some Byzantine troops were able to steal out later under cover of darkness and retrieve the corpse, but they returned without the head for the Turks had carried it off as a trophy to Musa. The victim's father, the wealthy businessman and diplomat Nicholas Notaras, had to pay a considerable ransom to have the head returned so that he could bury his son intact. The atrocity seems to have shocked the Byzantines. The abbot of St John in Petra wrote some verses to

lament the young man's fate, though it is unlikely that they were of great consolation to his father. Henceforth it was Nicholas's younger son, Loukas, who stood to inherit his position and fortune.¹⁸

With no hope of defeating Musa militarily and no sign of Chrysoloras's efforts in the west bearing fruit in military aid, Manuel II had no option but to turn back to the old stratagems. Another member of the Ottoman ruling family was found to mount a challenge to Musa. This was Orhan, a son of the late Suleyman, who had sought asylum in Constantinople. In the autumn of 1411 he was despatched to Thessalonica to gather support in the hope of forcing Musa to lift the siege. He attracted a number of Turkish volunteers to his banner and might have mounted a serious challenge had he not been betrayed and handed over to Musa, who promptly had him strangled. There was only one realistic course of action left to Manuel, but he and his advisers must have thought long and hard before they resorted to it. They knew that they could invite Musa's elder brother Mehmed to cross from his power base in Asia Minor, but it was a dangerous thing to do. Mehmed might indeed prevail and rid the Byzantines of Musa, but that would leave him in control of the whole of the empire once ruled by his father Bayezid, east and west. If, on the other hand, Mehmed lost, then it would be the even more dangerous Musa who might rule a reunited Ottoman empire.

It was decided that the risk must be taken. A message was despatched to Mehmed in Bursa, begging him to bring his troops up to the Bosphorus where transport, presumably in Venetian or Genoese ships, would be arranged to bring them over to Europe. Mehmed was only too happy to take the opportunity to extend his power into the Balkans and dispose of his erstwhile protégé. He crossed the straits and was warmly welcomed in Constantinople by Manuel II, but his attack on Musa's besieging army in the spring of 1412 was not a success. Mehmed himself was injured in the fighting and his soldiers, both

Turkish and Byzantine, were driven back into Constantinople. Clearly disheartened, Mehmed returned to Bursa and Musa's siege went on.¹⁹

The following year, however, Mehmed was back. Manuel II had, it was said, restored Mehmed's spirits 'with prudent words' and, perhaps more importantly, had replaced his lost military equipment. This time the confrontation took place to the south of Sofia in Bulgaria and Mehmed had Serbian allies to help him. Probably outnumbered, Musa's army was overwhelmed and its leader fled the field on horseback. His escape was suddenly cut short when he found himself in a marsh where his horse floundered in the mud. As one of his pursuers came up behind him, Musa wheeled round and struck him down with his sword, only to have his own arm chopped off by his next assailant. Fainting from loss of blood, Musa fell from his horse and into the mire where he bled to death. His body was brought to Mehmed, who made a show of public mourning before sending it off to Bursa for a burial that befitted a son of Bayezid.²⁰

Constantinople had been saved, but at a price. With Musa dead, his brother now became undisputed Sultan Mehmed I (r.1413–1421), ruler of both the European and Asiatic halves of the Ottoman empire, and Byzantium once more had as a neighbour a sultan who commanded resources similar to those that Bayezid had enjoyed. There was another repercussion of Mehmed I's victory. It helped to reignite the internal debate in Byzantium on how best to respond to the Ottoman threat. When Mehmed met with Manuel's envoys in Adrianople after his victory, he welcomed them warmly and restored to them the lands along the Black Sea and Marmara coasts that had been Byzantine under the 1403 treaty but which Musa had seized. Mehmed is supposed to have said to the envoys:

Go tell my father, the emperor of the Romans, that with God's help and the co-operation of my father and emperor, I have girded on my

paternal power. Henceforth I will be as obedient to him as a son to a father. I am not ungrateful nor shall I ever prove to be thankless. Let him command whatever he wills and I will serve him with the utmost joy.²¹

Few Byzantines would have been simple enough to take such protestations at face value. They must have known that Mehmed's conciliatory attitude was not dictated solely by gratitude, if at all. The victory over Musa had by no means ended the sultan's troubles. In the wake of Timur's victory in 1402, many small Turkish principalities that had been crushed by Bayezid had taken the opportunity of Ottoman disarray and Timur's encouragement to reassert their independence. Their rulers were as apprehensive as the Christians of the Balkans of an Ottoman resurgence and took steps to prevent it. While Mehmed was fighting Musa in the Balkans, the emir of Karaman in Southern Asia Minor took advantage of his absence to march north on Bursa. The city was sacked for the second time in ten years. The Karamanid troops took particular delight in desecrating the tomb of Bayezid that Mehmed had recently built, exhuming and burning the great sultan's bones.

Mehmed thus spent much of his reign fighting in Asia Minor to restore Ottoman hegemony, leaving no time to spare in which to terrorise the Christians of the Balkans. In 1415 he took his revenge on the Karamanids by marching south into their territory, burning the towns and villages as he went and capturing their capital of Konya. The emir was forced to flee east to the mountains of Syria and then to make a treaty by which he returned to Ottoman vassalage. Mehmed also waged a successful war on the Black Sea's southern coast against the emir of Sinope, Isfendiyar (r.1402–1439), who had helped Musa in his bid for power. There were other matters that kept Mehmed's attention away from Constantinople. His rule was seriously challenged in 1416

by an uprising in Bulgaria led by Sheikh Bedreddin, and in the same year Mehmed's fleet was destroyed off Gallipoli in an almost accidental naval battle with the Venetians. To cap it all, the sultan did not enjoy good health, suffering from recurring bouts of epilepsy.²²

The question anxiously being asked in Constantinople, therefore, was how the sultan's preoccupation might be best exploited. There were two possible ways of doing so. One was to do nothing so as to avoid undermining any residual goodwill that Mehmed might feel. Another was to use this respite to make preparations in case the sultan or his successors decided to resume Bayezid's ambitions. Manuel II inclined to the latter view and after 1413 he continued to make contact with the Latin west, to build up his fortifications and to fish in the troubled waters of Ottoman dynastic politics. It was during Mehmed's reign that work began to fortify the Isthmus of Corinth, and Manuel sent ambassadors to Venice to ask for a contribution towards the cost.²³ He also set about gathering a collection of useful Turkish renegades.

There were plenty of Ottoman princes who had no love for Mehmed I. One of Bayezid's younger sons, Yusuf, had escaped the civil war among his brothers by taking refuge in Constantinople. He was followed a few years later by a grandson of Suleyman, named Orhan. Regrettably, it soon emerged that neither Yusuf nor Orhan were of much use as potential challengers to Mehmed. Orhan was probably a child when he arrived in Constantinople. He could only be kept in reserve for some possible use in the future and he was destined to play a minor role in the last siege of Constantinople in 1453. Mehmed's brother Yusuf turned out to be a man of letters rather than of action. He became fascinated by ancient Greek literature and accompanied Manuel's eldest son John to school to study the classics. So impressed was Yusuf with what he saw in Constantinople that he begged the emperor to allow him to be accepted into the Orthodox Church. Manuel was reluctant to permit this, no doubt because a Christian

Yusuf would have little chance of ever becoming sultan and therefore his political usefulness would be at an end. Then in around 1416 plague broke out in Constantinople and Yusuf was struck down by the disease. On his deathbed he begged to be baptised and his request was honoured, the Christian name of Demetrius being given to him. The next day he died, and Manuel saw to it that he was buried with all the honour due to a Christian prince in the monastery of St John Stoudios.²⁴

A much more useful pawn was soon to emerge in another son of Bayezid, Mustafa. Unlike Yusuf/Demetrius, Mustafa had every intention of challenging his brother Mehmed for the Ottoman throne. In 1415 he arrived in Europe accompanied by Juneid of Smyrna, one of the minor Turkish emirs who had been fighting for independence from Ottoman overlordship. Their attempt to gather support met with no success, however, and when Mehmed bore down on them with his army in Macedonia, Mustafa and Juneid fled to the safety of Thessalonica. Mehmed then laid siege to Thessalonica's walls and demanded that the fugitives be handed over. The city was at that time effectively ruled by Demetrius Laskaris Leontaris who was acting as regent for Manuel's third son, the young Despot Andronicus. Leontaris asked the sultan whether he could consult with the emperor in Constantinople on what to do. The result of the subsequent negotiations was an agreement that the Byzantines would not hand Mustafa and Juneid over to Mehmed but that they would imprison them securely instead. The sultan would hand over a generous sum of money every year for their maintenance. Mustafa was then sent to the island of Limnos while Juneid was found a home in a monastery in Constantinople.²⁵

Direct confrontation had been avoided and the Byzantines had acquired a useful card to play in the future, but the episode left Byzantine relations with Mehmed I at a very low ebb. The sultan can

hardly have been happy with the way that he had been baulked of his prey, and the Byzantines were well aware of that. In a letter of 1416 Manuel II described Mehmed as a 'hostile beast' who deeply resented the construction of the Hexamilion wall, which had commenced the year before, and who would have stopped it if he had been able to. The archbishop of Thessalonica denounced Mehmed as a 'wild wolf' who concealed his anger and nourished his rage. They both believed that it was only a matter of time before he struck either at Constantinople or Thessalonica, and there must have been those who felt that Mehmed had been provoked unnecessarily.²⁶

Early in 1421 it looked as if the moment had come. Mehmed announced his intention of passing by Constantinople on his way from his capital of Adrianople to cross the Bosphorus to Asia Minor. Many of the emperor's advisers feared that this was a cloak for an attempt to seize Constantinople in a surprise attack and urged Manuel to pre-empt it by having Mehmed kidnapped. Manuel ruled against that but he did not send any of his sons on ahead to greet Mehmed as he might otherwise have done. Instead, he sent a group of nobles led by the faithful Leontaris, who presented Mehmed with gifts and accompanied him to the small port of Diplokionion on the Bosphorus. If Mehmed was harbouring secret plans, he showed no sign, chatting affably to Leontaris the whole way. At the port, Manuel and his sons were waiting on a vessel that had been made ready to convey the sultan to Skoutari. The crossing was made and the sultan rode away with his retinue towards Nicomedia. Manuel and his advisers breathed again.²⁷

A few months later Mehmed returned, crossing this time further west via the Dardanelles and travelling north from there to Adrianople. Still fearful of his intentions, Manuel sent Leontaris as his envoy to the sultan to remind him of the 'friendship' that existed between them. Leontaris was received warmly enough but the sultan complained that he was unwell and promised to discuss matters in a few days' time

when he felt himself again. The days and weeks went by and Leontaris waited in his quarters, wondering why no summons came. Only later did he learn that Mehmed had suffered an epileptic seizure and had died on 21 May, only three days after the first interview. The news had been kept secret in order to allow Mehmed's son Murad time to reach Bursa and take the throne. The corpse of the former sultan had remained propped in his bed for some forty days, and only his two viziers and two physicians knew the truth. They would enter the private apartment each day, supposedly to consult with the sultan on the state of his health. Only when news arrived that Murad was safely at Bursa was Mehmed's death announced in Adrianople.²⁸ The change of rulers was to bring Manuel II's diplomacy of the previous two decades crashing down.

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It was not that the new sultan was a particularly aggressive individual. On the contrary, Murad II (r.1421–1451) did not like war. Left to himself, he probably would have preferred to concentrate on art and literature. He was a patron of scholars and held weekly gatherings to discuss scientific and literary questions, awarding prizes to those whom he judged to have acquitted themselves best in the debate. He commissioned translations of works of Persian literature into Turkish and even wrote poetry himself. He was also a great builder and it was under his patronage that some of the most outstanding monuments of early Ottoman art were created. Foremost among them are the beautiful Green Mosque and Tomb in Bursa, which had been started by Mehmed I and was completed by Murad II. Both tomb and mosque derive their name from the turquoise tiles that adorn their interiors, and the former was to be the last resting place of Mehmed I. In 1425–6 Murad also constructed a mosque of his own in Bursa, followed by two

more in Adrianople – the Muradiye, built in 1426–7, and the so-called Three-Balconied Mosque, which was completed in 1445 at a cost of 7,000 bags of gold. None of these mosques stood alone. They were all surrounded by a complex of buildings known as a *wagf*, which usually included a hospital, a canteen where food was distributed to the poor and a madrasa, or Koran school. The Muradiye in Bursa was also the site of a tomb built in readiness for Murad's own burial. The Sultan's other great monument is the Uzunköprü, or 'long bridge', whose 174 arches were thrown across a tributary of the Marica river in Thrace between 1426 and 1445. Apart from building, Murad's other favourite pastime was drinking. It was said that he could dispose of ten or twelve large cups of wine in a session and that he did not take kindly to being reminded of the Islamic prohibition on alcohol. A preacher who had the temerity to do so was flung into jail.²⁹

Yet for all the opulent building and dedicated drinking, there was something of the ascetic about Murad. He completely lacked the stately bearing of Manuel II, being short and rather chubby with a large nose, and he deeply distrusted worldly pomp and ceremony. He was prepared to adhere to such conventions when it was a matter of impressing foreign ambassadors. An Italian who visited his court at Adrianople in May 1444 was received in 'an enormous hall full of vast brilliance and pomp, and around the room [there was] a great throng of magnificently exotic courtiers'.³⁰ In everyday matters, however, the sultan dressed and behaved much like his subjects, as the Franciscan friar George of Mühlenbach observed during his time in Adrianople as a prisoner between 1438 and 1458:

I saw the ruler, followed only by two young men, on his way to the mosque far away from his palace. I saw him going to the baths in the same way . . . I have seen the sultan at prayer in the mosque. He sat neither on a chair nor on a throne, but like the others had taken his

place on a carpet spread out on the floor. Around him no decoration had been placed, hung or spread out. On his clothing or on his horse the sultan had no special mark to distinguish him. I watched him at his mother's funeral, and if he had not been pointed out to me, I could not have recognised him.³¹

One certainly does not get the impression of a man filled with ambition or conquering zeal. Nevertheless, Murad was to turn on Byzantium and bring the empire back to the very situation that it had faced under his grandfather Bayezid. That he did so was partly the fault of the Byzantines themselves.

Realising that he was advancing in years, Manuel II had for some time been allowing his eldest son John to play a part in government. In 1414 he had left the twenty-one-year-old John as regent in Constantinople while he travelled to the Morea to supervise the building of the Hexamilion wall. In 1421, at the time that John was married to his second wife Sophia of Montferrat, the young man was crowned as co-emperor with his father, making him a partner henceforth in the rule of the empire. The arrangement was no doubt designed to make clear exactly who Manuel's successor was to be and thus prevent a power struggle among the emperor's sons after his death. It did, however, have the disadvantage of creating two camps in regard to policy towards the Ottomans.³²

That rift made itself felt as soon as the news of Mehmed's death was brought to Constantinople by Demetrius Laskaris Leontaris. Manuel and John met with their advisers and discussed the possible options. There seemed only to be two. The Byzantines could continue the policy that they had followed with Mehmed I of preserving a 'friendship', however fragile that might be. Alternatively, they could play the card that they had up their sleeves and release Mustafa, allowing him to seize the European provinces while his nephew Murad was still in

Bursa and so embroil the Ottomans once more in civil war. Manuel was in favour of the first course of action, probably reasoning that covert building up of the defences was one thing, but open defiance of a reigning sultan was another. John and his supporters, on the other hand, championed the second option. After all, as their reward for their assistance, the Byzantines could require Mustafa to hand over Gallipoli. After some debate, Manuel wearily gave in, allegedly saying 'Do as you wish, my son, I am an old man, ill and close to death. I have handed over the empire and its affairs to you. Deal with them as you please'.³³

Thus it was that in September 1421, Murad II's uncle, Mustafa, was brought by Leontaris from his place of exile on Limnos and released into Thrace, along with Juneid of Smyrna, after they had sworn oaths to obey the emperor and to cede to him the town of Gallipoli. At first, Mustafa enjoyed some success. He captured Adrianople and defeated one of Murad's viziers who had been sent to deal with him. Murad sent envoys to Constantinople asking for aid against his rival, an approach that the Byzantines seem to have ignored. Before long, however, the whole enterprise began to go horribly wrong. Mustafa, once he had Gallipoli, refused to hand it over, knowing full well that the Byzantines had no means of forcing him to do so. Then in January 1422 Mustafa decided to cross the Dardanelles and attack Murad near Bursa, only to suffer a humiliating reverse and flee back to Thrace. When Murad arrived with his army in Europe, Mustafa's supporters, including Juneid, largely deserted him. After an attempt at flight, Mustafa was captured near the Danube and, since Murad refused even to recognise that he was one of Bayezid's sons, he was hanged like a common criminal.³⁴

The Byzantines were now left to face the wrath of Murad II alone and he did not delay in taking vengeance for their support of Mustafa. In June 1422 his army appeared before the walls of Constantinople. The Byzantines must have expected this and no doubt would have prepared themselves for a blockade similar to that mounted by Bayezid

in 1394 or by his son Musa in 1411. This time, however, the Ottomans launched no mere blockade but a determined attempt to take the city by storm. The commander of the army, Michaloglu, began by ordering the construction of an earth rampart and trench that ran the length of the Land Walls from the Golden Gate in the south to the Palace of Blachernae in the north, to act as a forward position for the Turkish troops. Behind this were positioned the siege engines with which the Land Walls were to be battered and they were concentrated on the stretch between the Gate of St Romanos and the Gate of Adrianople on the northern end. The Turks constructed tall wooden towers that were higher than the Land Walls, enabling archers to fire down on the defenders, and they also had a supply of 'Tortoises', wheeled shelters covered in thick hides. These were to be manoeuvred close to the Land Walls to provide protection for those digging tunnels under the fortifications.

As well as these devices that would have been familiar to Roman generals like Julius Caesar, Murad's troops had another form of equipment. A Byzantine eyewitness to the siege, John Kananos, noticed that they had with them what he called *falkounia*, or falcons, a type of small cannon. Cannon were not by any means new weapons in 1422. Gunpowder had been known in the Islamic world at least as early as 1291 when explosive projectiles were used in the siege of the last crusader fortress of Acre, and by the early fourteenth century Arab armies were using small cannon in Spain. By the middle of the century these weapons were being used in western Europe as well, notably by the English at the siege of Calais in 1346. The Byzantines had also adopted them. Their first recorded use was in 1390 when John VII had bombarded his grandfather John V in the fortress of the Golden Gate, and the defenders of 1422 had their own supply of cannon which they used to fire potshots from the walls at the Turks behind their earth rampart.

It would seem, however, that the cannon used by Murad's army were no wonder weapon. They could scare, maim or kill enemy soldiers but they did not have a significant impact on masonry. John Kananos described how the Turks concentrated the fire of the largest cannon on one particular tower that appeared to be in bad repair between the Gate of Adrianople and the Gate of St Romanos. Although they hit the tower over seventy times, it stood firm. In all probability, the cannon was just not big enough to fire a ball of the size needed to smash the great stone blocks. As yet the Ottomans did not have the technology both to manufacture a barrel that was large enough to fire a cannonball of the necessary size but which would not immediately be burst into fragments by the blast.³⁵

In spite of the ineffectiveness of the cannon, the siege of 1422 was a very dangerous moment. The fighting during the summer of that year was intense and it culminated on 24 August when the Turks launched a full-scale assault on the Land Walls. It was really a mass attack, and sheer weight of numbers seems to have got the Turks over the moat to the outer wall, which they then sought to scale using ladders and grappling hooks. The aged emperor Manuel was unable to come to the walls at this moment of crisis, but John took up position on horseback at the Gate of St Romanos where the attack was fiercest. At first the defenders reeled in the face of the sheer ferocity of the assault, but they rallied, inspired by reports that the Virgin Mary had been seen on the Walls. A determined resistance not only pushed the Turks off the outer wall but also back across the moat. Many of their siege engines were left behind in the retreat and burned by the victorious defenders.³⁶

Clearly, Constantinople was not going to fall and on 6 September, Murad called off the siege and his army withdrew.³⁷ That did not mean he had given up his plan to punish the Byzantines. Even as one Turkish army under Michaloglu had been digging in before Constantinople in June, another had been mounting an attack on Thessalonica. In this

case, the Ottoman army did not withdraw and it settled down to start a long blockade.³⁸ Nor was the Peloponnese to be spared. In the spring of 1423 Murad sent his general, Turahan, south towards the Isthmus of Corinth. Here was the opportunity for the Hexamilion wall to prove itself and to hold the Turks at bay as the defences of Constantinople and Thessalonica already had. It proved to be a paper tiger. When Turahan arrived there was scarcely anyone to man the ramparts for many of the defenders had fled when they had heard of his approach. One suspects that although the money had been found to build the wall, it had run short when it came to paying the garrison. In the absence of any opposition, the Turks simply walked through the Hexamilion, taking care to demolish sections of it as they went. Only to the south did they meet any effective opposition in the form of an army of Albanians, but this was brushed aside. Turahan's army then proceeded to burn and pillage its way through the Morea before withdrawing back over the Isthmus. Apart from the check at Constantinople, Murad's armies had enjoyed complete success and the Byzantines could only wait to see where they would strike next.³⁹

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As the storm clouds gathered over Constantinople, Thessalonica and the Hexamilion, it was not just Manuel II and his circle who were anxiously scanning the horizon. Many of the emperor's subjects were also looking to the future and some of them decided that it did not lie within the borders of the shadow empire. The possibility of a Turkish takeover may have prompted some to arrive at that conclusion, but others had a quite different reason: the heavy burden of being a subject of the emperor. During the summer of 1415, as work progressed on the Hexamilion wall, Manuel's subjects in the Morea became increasingly resentful of the heavy taxes that were being levied to pay for it and rose

up in revolt. Manuel II denounced the rebels for considering 'fighting with one another as preferable to peace', but as he himself had to admit rather cryptically: 'Everything can be attributed to one cause, their desire not to be within those walls, those on the Isthmus'. There was also a strong economic motive for emigration, to enhance personal wealth and life chances. One Byzantine courtier claimed that he was advised to go and live abroad so that he would not end up 'starving like a dog' back home.⁴⁰

Whatever the precise motive, there were a number of options for those Byzantines who wished to leave, and the choices that they made probably reflected the divisions in Byzantine society. Some made their way to the Orthodox countries to the north, particularly to Russia. Others even took themselves off to the Turks. Murad II had in his service an individual bearing the Byzantine name of Vranas who served him as an ambassador to foreign courts and who was probably chosen because he had a wide command of languages. Then there were those who threw in their lot with the Latins. The most obvious and closest refuges in this regard were the Venetian colonies in Greece, such as the islands of Negroponte and Crete, and the towns on the coast of the Peloponnese such as Modon and Coron. In September 1415 the Venetian Senate noted that many Greek seamen had fled from the emperor's territory in the Morea to theirs to escape high taxation at home. Such flits over the border were not necessarily permanent. Many of those who went to Venetian territory during Mehmed I's siege of Thessalonica in 1416, for example, subsequently returned.⁴¹ What was different now was that more Byzantines were emigrating permanently and that they were travelling further afield, not just to Latin colonies in Greece but to western Europe itself. The numbers were relatively small and most of those headed for Italy. A few isolated individuals, however, now appeared in England and France, in all probability influenced by the better knowledge of those countries brought back to

Byzantium by Manuel II's diplomatic offensive in the west between 1394 and 1403.

Leaving Byzantine territory was one thing. Sustaining oneself outside it in the long term was a different matter. The most successful emigrants were those who could offer some kind of skill that was in demand in the host country. Artists seem to have found a welcome everywhere. A Byzantine painter called Theophanes worked in Russia between 1370 and 1405. An extraordinarily prolific craftsman, he was responsible for the frescoes adorning some forty churches in Novgorod, Moscow and other towns. A Constantinopolitan painter called George was active in the Italian city of Ferrara between 1404 and 1420, although none of his productions can be identified with certainty. Byzantine artists seem to have been particularly sought after on Crete. The brothers Alexios and Angelos Apokaukos who were probably from Constantinople were active on the island between 1399 and 1421. Another pair of brothers, Manuel and John Phokas, were responsible for the decoration of a number of churches in eastern Crete between 1435 and about 1453, and they probably also originally came from Constantinople. Another skill that was in demand was medicine. Byzantine physicians found work in the city state of Ragusa, in France and England, and in Italy, like Christodoulos of Thessalonica who was practising in Florence in 1445.⁴²

Italy provided particular opportunities that were not available elsewhere. The burgeoning Renaissance saw Italian intellectuals eager to rediscover classical Greek literature, but they were hampered by a lack of knowledge of the Greek language and a shortage of reliable texts. Educated Byzantines who could assist them were therefore welcomed and the opportunity would have been particularly attractive to those who admired Latin theology and culture. One of them was Manuel Chrysoloras, the indefatigable ambassador of Manuel II. While in Venice on imperial business in 1394, Chrysoloras had supple-

mented his income by giving some lessons in ancient Greek to a Florentine called Roberto Rossi. On his return to his native city, Rossi passed an enthusiastic account of his teacher to Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), the chancellor of Florence. So impressed was Salutati that he decided to secure Chrysoloras's services and in 1396 invited him to teach grammar and Greek literature at the University of Florence. Chrysoloras duly came and had a tremendous impact. His lectures were thronged with eager learners and among his pupils were numbered some of the foremost Italian intellectuals of the day, such as Guarino da Verona, who was later to spend time in Constantinople, and Pallas Strozzi (1372–1462).⁴³

Remarkably, Chrysoloras did not remain in Florence to bask in his celebrity status. In 1400 he left to join Manuel II, who had recently arrived in Italy from Constantinople, and he spent the rest of his career as a diplomat rather than as a teacher. Others, however, used the opportunities provided by Italy to leave Byzantium for good. Demetrius Skaranos, a relative of Chrysoloras who had held office at the Byzantine court, also moved to Florence where he taught Greek to Cardinal Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439). Although he hardly enjoyed Chrysoloras's success, Traversari recording unkindly that he was not a good teacher, Skaranos never returned to Constantinople and died in Florence in 1426. Rather more successful was Theodore Gaza (*c.*1400–1475), a native of Thessalonica. He moved to Italy as a young man around 1434 and after studying at Mantua found a post teaching Greek at the University of Ferrara. Like Skaranos, he spent the rest of his life in his adopted country, working in Rome and Naples. As well as teaching Greek, he produced Latin translations of ancient Greek texts, notably Aristotle, for various patrons. Both men converted to Catholicism, for otherwise life in the west would have been impossible for them.⁴⁴

To immigrants like Skaranos and Gaza the contrast between the wealth and vibrancy of Italy and the dangerous situation at home must

have been striking. Manuel Chrysoloras reacted with boyish delight when he found himself amongst the bright lights of Rome, as he recorded in a letter to his kinsman Demetrius Chrysoloras:

Can you believe of me that I am wandering about this city of Rome, swivelling my eyes this way and that like some boorish gallant, clambering up palace walls, even up to their windows, on the chance of seeing something of the beauties inside? I never used to do this sort of thing when I was young, as you know, and had a poor opinion of those who did. Yet here I am, getting on in years, and I scarcely know how I have been brought to this point.⁴⁵

The attraction of Italy with its vibrant and wealthy cities at the height of the Renaissance is obvious. Less immediately apparent is why any Byzantine should wish to go and live in England at the end of the Hundred Years War and in the early stages of the Wars of the Roses. Nevertheless, they did. Another two brothers, Andronicus and Alexios Effomatos, probably left Constantinople during the late 1430s and from before 1441 they were living in London. Four years later they were granted permission by the king of England, Henry VI (r.1422–1461), to remain in the country as long as they wished. The skill that the Effomatos brothers had to offer their hosts was that of gold wire drawing and the production of high-quality gold cloth, a product for which Constantinople had long been famous. They prospered in their new home, owning a house in the Cripplegate area of London and employing four servants. Andronicus remained in England until his death around 1471 and Alexios was still there in 1483, some forty years after they first arrived.

It was probably the wealth of London that attracted the Effomatos brothers. The city profited from its position on the navigable Thames to act as a centre for the export of English wool and for the import

of goods from abroad, so that even an Italian could describe the city as abounding 'with every article of luxury as well as with the necessities of life'. The presence of the king and court at nearby Westminster would also have provided a market for the kind of luxury goods that the Effomatos brothers produced. Perhaps most important of all, thanks to the wide commercial networks that the Venetians and Genoese had forged, the links that so many Byzantines had with them in Constantinople could easily be transferred elsewhere. Andronicus and Alexios Effomatos certainly had those links. They lived in the area of London where the Italians congregated, and like their compatriots in Constantinople they regularly imported commodities such as cloth, wine, ginger and daggers into the port of London on both Venetian and Genoese vessels. These they then no doubt sold on at a profit. Effectively, they were doing in London exactly what the businessman and diplomat Nicholas Notaras and other wealthy Byzantines were doing in Constantinople. It is likely that this association of the Effomatos brothers with Italian merchants, rather than their craft of gold wire drawing, was the key to the way they were able to sustain themselves in London and ultimately to prosper.⁴⁶

Not all Byzantine emigrants to the west enjoyed the same success as the Effomatos brothers. There were all kinds of potential dangers, as one of their less fortunate compatriots discovered. In 1415 a certain Michael Dishypatos was living at Chambéry in the duchy of Savoy. Originally from Constantinople, Dishypatos was the bearer of a long-established Byzantine name and an educated man who practised as a physician. Initially he did well for himself in his new home, becoming the personal doctor of the duke of Savoy, Amadeo VIII (r.1391–1434). Two years later, however, his luck turned when he found himself arrested and accused of sorcery. Brought to trial, he was charged with all kinds of bizarre and outlandish practices. He was alleged to have relieved one gullible individual of the sum of four silver

coins for an engraved copper dish, which he had promised would enable the bearer to marry the woman of his dreams. More seriously, Dishypatos was said to have conspired with a wealthy bourgeois and ducal counsellor, Jean Lageret, to use sorcery to manipulate the health of the duke of Savoy. These accusations were almost certainly trumped up and Dishypatos's confession to them was obtained under torture. His mistake had been to become inadvertently involved in local politics and to associate himself too closely with Lageret, whose wealth and power had aroused the jealousy of the duke. Brought to trial on similarly concocted charges in September 1417, Lageret was found guilty of treason, paraded through the streets in a cart and then beheaded. His wealth then passed to the duke of Savoy. Dishypatos was not executed but he was sentenced to life imprisonment in the castle of Le Bourget.⁴⁷

For Michael Dishypatos the west had proved to be no refuge, but for his compatriots left behind in Constantinople the situation was scarcely better by 1423. The turn of events must have been crushing to the elderly emperor Manuel II and it is doubtless no coincidence that, less than a month after the Turkish withdrawal from the siege of Constantinople, on 1 October 1422, he suffered a massive stroke which paralysed one side of his body.⁴⁸ Although he lived for nearly three more years, dying on 21 July 1425 at the age of seventy-seven, he played no further part in governing Byzantium. From the end of 1422, Byzantium's destiny was in the hands of Manuel's eldest son, John. It was he who would have to find some way of pulling Byzantium back from the brink.



Twisting the Lion's Tail

JOHN VIII PALAIOLOGOS (r.1425–1448) is the only Byzantine emperor of whom a realistic portrait, drawn from the life, survives. It was made by the Italian artist Pisanello (c.1395–c.1455) and subsequently incorporated into a bronze portrait medal. It shows the emperor as he was at the age of forty-seven. His thin face is in profile, with a pointed beard and curled ringlets falling back over his collar, ‘a very handsome man’, according to an Italian who saw him in Florence, ‘with a beard of the Greek cut’. It is a sensitive face and a sad one, perhaps what one would expect of a son of the scholarly Manuel II, although the melancholy expression may not be philosophic detachment but the result of the painful gout from which John suffered for most of his life.¹

John's accession to power inevitably saw a new generation of imperial advisers coming to prominence at court. Foremost among them was Loukas Notaras (d. 1453), the younger son and heir of Nicholas Notaras who probably died sometime in the 1420s. At some point, Loukas married into the imperial family, possibly to a daughter of the late John VII, and received the office of Mesazon and later that of Grand Duke, making him the nearest thing in Constantinople to a chief minister. He inherited his father's sizeable fortune and when he married off his three eldest daughters between 1445 and 1453, he was

able to provide each of them with a dowry of no less than 20,000 gold ducats. The courtier and chronicler George Sphrantzes did not like him and portrayed him as a selfish individual who openly declared that nothing mattered apart from his own affairs. Most rich and powerful people attract that sort of criticism, however, and in any case Sphrantzes was a political rival who could be expected to denigrate the opposition. It would seem from other evidence that Notaras was extremely dedicated in his service both to John VIII and his successor, and he was, according to another contemporary 'known for the loftiness of his sentiments and the sharpness of his intellect and the freedom of his spirit from all trammels'.²

Another close adviser at John's court was Demetrius Palaiologos Metochites (d. 1453), likewise a relative by marriage, who received the offices of Grand Stratopedarch and Eparch, or governor of the city of Constantinople. He was to prove an indefatigable ally in the difficult times ahead. Mark and Manuel Palaiologos Iagaris were also relatives by marriage and close advisers. It was an advantage no doubt that the Notaras, Metochites and Iagaris families were all very wealthy and could serve the emperor without any need for remuneration.³ As well as these grandees, John attracted to his court a number of talented young men from less privileged backgrounds. Both George Scholarios (c.1403–1472) and John Argyropoulos (c.1415–1487), who started their careers as teachers in Constantinople, came to prominence early in the new reign and rose to become judges. John VIII also noticed a talented young monk called Bessarion (1402–1472). Since Bessarion was from Trebizond in eastern Asia Minor, the emperor gave him the job of travelling to his native city and negotiating the marriage alliance with his third wife Princess Maria of Trebizond, in 1427, and he later made Bessarion abbot of the monastery of St Basil in Constantinople.⁴ These men, particularly Notaras, Scholarios and Bessarion, were to be the leaders of the future, playing prominent roles in Byzantium's endgame.

As well as promoting a new generation of Byzantines, John, like his father Manuel, was keen to cultivate Latins, to attract them to his court and to use them as advocates for the Byzantine cause in the west. Giovanni Aurispa (1376–1459) of Sicily was his secretary between 1421 and 1424, and the humanist Cyriac of Ancona (1391–1452) visited his court and corresponded with him. The Spanish soldier Pero Tafur, who visited Constantinople in the 1430s, was urged by John to stay and settle in the Byzantine capital ‘for the city is badly populated and there is need of good soldiers’. Tafur did not stay, but a Welshman called Hugh Johnys served in the Byzantine army for five years before leaving Constantinople to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1441. When he left, John furnished him with a glowing testimonial and when in the fullness of time Hugh died, his time in the Byzantine army was recorded on his memorial brass in the church of St Mary in Swansea.⁵

Although John inherited his father's dignified bearing and followed his policy of cultivating useful Latins, he has not always been accorded the same credit for intelligent statesmanship in impossible circumstances. His unwise decision to release Mustafa in 1421 has been held against him as has his treatment of his Italian second wife, Sophia of Montferrat. The couple had been married in January 1421 but John had never cared for his bride because he objected to her looks and because ‘he was extremely addicted to the pleasures of the flesh’. As long as Manuel II was alive, John let matters stand, but he would have nothing to do with Sophia who was left to live a lonely life in her apartment in the palace of Blachernae. With Manuel's death, it is likely that Sophia's position deteriorated. In August 1426, unable to bear it anymore, she crossed the Golden Horn to Pera and from there took ship for home. John promptly entered into negotiations with the ruler of Trebizond, Alexios IV (r.1417–1429), and in September 1427 married his daughter, Maria. The new empress was a famous beauty. One male visitor to Constantinople waited all day without food or drink just to catch a

glimpse of her and when he finally did, he noted how good she looked in 'one of those long hats with a point, so common in Greece'.⁶

His mistake over Mustafa and unkindness to Sophia apart, John was as good an emperor as the difficult situation allowed, a competent soldier and a conscientious administrator. He had learned from his mistake over Mustafa, just as his father had from his disastrous defence of Thessalonica in 1383–7. Consequently, for the first years of his reign, he acted much as Manuel II had, bowing to Ottoman pressure when he had to but indulging in covert defiance when he could, twisting the tail of the sleeping Ottoman lion.

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At the time that John VIII took power in the autumn of 1422, the Ottoman sultan was by no means dormant. The Byzantines were reeling from the catastrophic fallout from their ill-judged backing of Mustafa's attempt to dethrone Murad II and from Murad's subsequent siege of Constantinople's Land Walls. Although the attack on Constantinople had been broken off in that year, Byzantium was still at war with the Ottomans and Thessalonica was still under siege. Something had to be done to retrieve the situation, but John's first efforts to do so were not very successful.

His first thought was of money to fund the Ottoman war. He tried to raise it by placing a tax on wine and approached the government of Venice to ask whether they would allow it to be collected from their subjects too. The response was a flat refusal. He hoped, too, that there might still be profit to be had from interfering in Ottoman dynastic strife. Sultan Murad II had two younger brothers who were potential rivals to the throne. One he had had strangled shortly after his accession but the other succeeded in reaching Constantinople in September 1422, on the day before Manuel II suffered his stroke. This prince was

also named Mustafa and he may have been no more than six years old but he did have a body of supporters among the Turks willing to back his bid for the throne. After a short stay in Constantinople, they departed for Bursa to stake young Mustafa's claim against his brother. He proved even less successful than the other Mustafa. Early in 1423 he was betrayed by some of his attendants and handed over to Murad's adherents, who promptly strangled the boy.⁷

John's efforts, therefore, had no effect whatsoever in lessening the pressure of Murad's armies, which was falling most heavily on Thessalonica. The city was now completely blockaded by land and could only receive supplies and reinforcements by sea, mainly in Venetian ships. Its ruler, the Despot Andronicus, John VIII's younger brother, was an invalid who suffered, according to various accounts, either from severe epilepsy or from leprosy, or even from elephantiasis.⁸ It is therefore hardly surprising that the increasingly desperate citizens started to take matters into their own hands. On 13 May disturbing news reached the Senate of Venice from the captain of a vessel that had sailed from the region one month before:

The people of Thessalonica had sent to tell the Lord Turk [Murad II] that they wished to give themselves up on these terms: they said that they were prepared to give him two thirds of their revenues and live off one third themselves, and to remain at peace, and if not, they would send to the [Venetian] regime of Negroponte so that they could give themselves to the dogal Signoria of Venice.⁹

The threat to surrender the city either to the Ottomans or to the Venetians was not an idle one. Andronicus had already sent an anguished appeal for aid to Constantinople, but it took a long time for a response to come. When an envoy of the co-emperors Manuel II and John VIII did arrive, he brought no tangible aid and his only

contribution was the suggestion that the citizens should donate more of their wealth to fund the defence.¹⁰ It might have been this incident and the uproar that it provoked which persuaded Andronicus to opt for what might have been considered the lesser of the two evils and open negotiations with the Venetian authorities on the island of Negroponte, offering to hand Thessalonica over if the Venetians would defend it against the Turks.

The despot's offer arrived in Venice itself on 1 July 1423 and was hotly debated by the Senate for an entire week. Thessalonica was an important trading port for the Venetians, and if it fell into Ottoman hands the terms under which they operated there would doubtless become a lot harsher. It was probably that consideration which prompted the Senate to vote to accept the despot's offer by 99 votes to 45, although the official record of the decision stresses that it was taken 'not because of any ambition of dominion but having always desired and desiring now that these parts should be safe'.¹¹

Anxious to ensure that the Venetian annexation was carried out in correct form, the doge despatched ambassadors to Constantinople to obtain the consent of Manuel II and John VIII to their takeover. Even more important was the attitude of Murad II. On 27 July the Senate approved a detailed set of instructions for some envoys who were to be sent to Adrianople armed with rich diplomatic gifts of Venetian, Florentine and Veronese cloth:

Presenting the ceremonial gifts sent to you by our bailey of Constantinople, you should explain to the Lord Turk that as he knows, a good friendship and peace used to flourish between his distinguished father and our government. . . . On hearing that His Excellency had ascended to the dignity of power in the place of his late father, we experienced and feel the most singular joy . . .

The main concern of the Venetian government was to ensure that their takeover in Thessalonica did not disrupt trading relations with the Ottomans or embroil them in an all-out war with the sultan:

You should say to His Excellency that we greatly desire that our citizens and merchants may travel in his territories and his cities, for the preservation of a good relationship, and to increase the good will between the two sides . . .¹²

These diplomatic niceties took some months and so it was only in September that the handover took place. The following month, when a Venetian flotilla of six ships loaded with supplies of corn reached Thessalonica, the vessels were greeted by cheering crowds and by banners of St Mark fluttering from the city walls. They arrived just in time as for the past eight days the citizens had been on the verge of starvation. Many had fled the city, its population having dropped from an estimated 30,000 to about 20,000. Even as the Venetians arrived, Andronicus was taking his leave, conducted out by one gate in the Sea Walls, it was said, while the Venetians entered by another. The former despot retired to the monastery of the Pantokrator in Constantinople, where he died some five years later. The transfer was complete but it must have been apparent almost immediately that it had not put an end to the danger. Ominously, there were still 5,000 Turkish troops encamped outside Thessalonica and they had no intention of leaving.¹³

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Relinquishing the second city of his empire to a foreign power was hardly an ideal way to keep Thessalonica out of Murad's hands, but in the circumstances John VIII had little alternative but to accept

Andronicus's decision. He may have hoped the city could be recovered at a later stage. Nor did the handover necessarily secure Constantinople or the rest of John's territories from possible attack by the Ottomans, especially now that the Hexamilion wall had been breached. There was really no alternative to peace with Murad II on whatever terms he chose to offer.

To facilitate the process, John judged it better to remove himself from the scene for the time being, heavily implicated as he was in the decision to interfere with Murad's accession, which had sparked off all the trouble. On 15 November 1423 he left Constantinople by sea bound for Venice, leaving his brother Constantine in charge of the city. From Venice, the emperor visited Verona, Pavia and Milan before travelling on to Hungary. The journey was no doubt also intended, like that of Manuel II, to facilitate discussions of financial and military support, and John certainly took advantage of his presence in Venice to take out a loan of 1,500 ducats, although he had hoped to raise 40,000.¹⁴ He cannot have been particularly hopeful, though, because even as he moved through northern Italy, his courtiers back home were busy on his instructions seeking an accommodation with the sultan, and a delegation composed of Loukas Notaras, George Sphrantzes and another nobleman called Manuel Melachrinos was setting out for Adrianople.

Only in November 1424 did John return to Constantinople, by which time the distasteful negotiations had been brought to a conclusion, the treaty having been concluded in February 1424. As the price of peace, the Byzantine emperor was reduced to a tributary vassal of the sultan. He was henceforth to pay an annual tribute of 100,000 ducats to Murad and he had to give up some of the territory on the coasts of the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea that he had regained back in 1403. In essence he was back in the position that he had been in before 1394, although no demand seems to have been made for John VIII to provide military assistance to the sultan.¹⁵

The 1424 treaty was officially to govern Byzantine relations with the Ottomans for the next twenty-eight years, but that did not mean that the Byzantines tamely accepted the subordinate status that it imposed. On the contrary, they were constantly testing the limits of the treaty and building up their resources in case of a future Ottoman attack, just as Manuel II had done in the early years after the accession of Mehmed I in 1413. Like his father, John VIII used the end of hostilities to build up his defences. Within a few years of the treaty, he initiated a series of repairs to the Land Walls of Constantinople, something that the attack by Murad's forces in the summer of 1422 had revealed to be urgently needed. The Ottoman forces had concentrated their cannon fire on precisely those areas that were in poor condition, including a tower between the Gate of St Romanos and the Gate of Adrianople that was 'fissured from top to bottom'.¹⁶ The work involved the restoration of existing towers and the inner and outer walls between them, a complete excavation of the moat that lay beyond them and the construction of three completely new towers.

The Land Walls had, of course, often been repaired, restored and extended in the past, but John seems to have gone about it in a different way from his predecessors. Since the imperial treasury was, as ever, short of funds, he delegated parts of the task to some of his wealthier subjects, as is clear from the inscriptions on the towers of the Land Walls that record the restoration. Some of them read '(Tower) of John Palaiologos, emperor in Christ' and give the date of the restoration. On the important Pegae gate, so-called because of its proximity to a spring that was supposed to have healing properties, the inscription reads rather differently:

This God-protected gate of the Life-giving Spring was restored with the co-operation and at the expense of Manuel Vryennios Leontaris, in the reigns of the most pious sovereigns, John and Maria Palaiologoi; in the month of May, in the year 1438.

Other prominent nobles whose names appear in the inscriptions include John's close advisers Loukas Notaras and Manuel Iagaris. It is likely that at least some of the money that they used to pay for these repairs came from their commercial activities in co-operation with the Venetians and Genoese, so it cannot be said that their enrichment brought no benefit to Byzantium as a whole. John was also prepared to accept help from foreign rulers in the vital task of providing for Constantinople's defence. In 1448, the ruler of Serbia, George Brankovich, helped with the restoration of the stretch of the Land Walls close to the Sea of Marmara.¹⁷

John and his courtiers must all have known that Murad might not take kindly to all this activity any more than Bayezid had to the Golden Gate fortress or Mehmed I to the construction of the Hexamilion wall. There is, however, no evidence that the sultan objected, and that forbearance may have given John courage to go further. In spite of his treaty with the sultan, he still harboured Ottoman pretenders and still sent envoys to the west to discuss military help against Murad. Perhaps most flagrant of all, he set about acquiring additional territory in the Peloponnese.

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Byzantine expansion in the Morea was not motivated solely by a desire to assert independence against the sultan. John VIII was also impelled to go on the offensive there by the need to defuse a revival of conflict among the members of the Byzantine royal family. The difficulty was that Manuel had provided only too well for the succession. When he died in July 1425, six sons survived him: John, Theodore, Andronicus, Constantine, Demetrius and Thomas. During his lifetime he had crowned John as co-emperor, and in line with late Byzantine practice the next two oldest brothers had been given appanages with the title of despot: Theodore ruled the Morea from its chief town of Mistra

while Andronicus had become despot of Thessalonica. After Manuel's death, John became sole emperor, Theodore was still at Mistra, Andronicus was now a monk in the Pantokrator monastery and the youngest, Thomas, was still a minor. That, however, left two brothers, Constantine and Demetrius, unprovided for. Unlike the bookish Theodore and the pious but ailing Andronicus, they were both ambitious and energetic men. Both were fast gaining a set of adherents within the Byzantine ruling class. Demetrius could count his brother-in-law, the Genoese Ilario Doria, Matthew Asanes and George Izaoul among his supporters.¹⁸ Theodore Karystinos, on the other hand, seems to have been an adherent of Constantine, sharing his passion for mounted archery, and George Sphrantzes was deeply devoted to Constantine as he made clear in his memoirs:

Lord Constantine and I had great rapport with each other, our friendship had sacred bonds as well, since my uncle had been his tutor and my cousins and I had been his companions, friends and attendants. When the time came and I became a personal minister to his memorable, late father, he was able to obtain through me many favours he needed from his father. Thus he was particularly glad to have me in his service.¹⁹

Inevitably too, both Constantine and Demetrius had their own views on how the empire should be run, so that the dynastic parties were coming to stand for a particular line of policy, just as they had in the rivalry between Manuel II and John VII. At this stage, Constantine seems to have believed that salvation lay in military strength in co-operation with western Christians rather than slavish obedience to the sultan. Demetrius, on the other hand, had adopted the mantle of John VII and was fast becoming the figurehead for those who saw accommodation with the Turks rather than continued resistance as the only solution to

the empire's difficult situation. John's policy of outward submission and closet defiance is unlikely to have appealed to either of them.

The development of miniature powerbases and differing views on policy within the house of Palaiologos was to lead to tension even before the old emperor Manuel had died. During the summer of 1423, when negotiations about the fate of Thessalonica were in progress and war still raged with Murad II, the seventeen-year-old Demetrius, accompanied by his brother-in-law Ilario Doria, had secretly crossed the Golden Horn to Pera. Their intention was to travel from there to the sultan's court at Adrianople, perhaps to communicate to Murad their unhappiness at the continuing hostilities. Demetrius's elderly parents begged him to return but he would not. In the end, however, he did not go to Adrianople but departed with Matthew Asanes for Hungary, ostensibly to conduct talks with the king of Hungary, Sigismund. At least the embarrassment of having a member of the imperial family in the enemy camp had been avoided.²⁰

The 1423 incident and the death of his father in 1425 must have made John realise that he would have to do something to assuage his brothers' ambitions and defuse their criticisms of his policy. He seems to have decided early on that the greatest threat was Constantine. Not only was he older than Demetrius or Thomas but he seems to have been gathering around him a group of similarly military-minded courtiers. When Constantine was in Constantinople, he and his followers were given to displaying their martial prowess in the Hippodrome, the city's stadium. On one occasion, accompanied by twenty or thirty horsemen, Constantine organised a display of horse archery. The participants would gallop at full pelt down the 480-metre-long racetrack. They would then throw their hats ahead of them and shoot arrows at them as they passed. Constantine was probably also behind a tournament that was held in celebration of the marriage of one of the emperor's relatives in 1433. Some forty horsemen charged a target, a plank of wood,

set up in the centre of the Hippodrome with a light lance that broke on impact.²¹

With nothing to do, such a man and his followers could be very dangerous and it was essential to find something to occupy him. Thus while John was away in the west in 1423–4, it was Constantine whom he left in charge in Constantinople. It was probably on his return that John sought to create an appanage for him. Thessalonica was now out of the question, so John allotted his brother the town of Mesembria on the Black Sea. Around the same time, John provided something for Demetrius, giving him the Aegean island of Limnos.²² The emperor seems to have appreciated that Mesembria would probably not satisfy Constantine for long, and that was why he did what might not be expected at this stage in Byzantine history. He launched a military offensive in the Morea.

The target was the lands of the Italian count of Cephalonia and duke of Leukas, Carlo I Tocco. During the first two decades of the fifteenth century, Tocco had expanded from his powerbase on the Ionian islands and had occupied much of Epiros, including the towns of Arta and Ioannina, carving out a mini-empire for himself along the coast of the Adriatic. His acquisitions had extended south into the Peloponnese in the early 1420s when he had occupied the plain of Elis on its north-western coast, including Glarentza, the main port that linked the Morea with Italy.

John arrived in the Morea in December 1427 along with his brother Constantine. The following spring the two men marched on Glarentza with a powerful force while a flotilla of ships was sent to enforce the blockade of the port by sea. Tocco held out as long as he could but since there was no hope of relief for this rather isolated outpost of his lordship, he was compelled to come to terms. He agreed to hand over the town, the area round about and, perhaps most important of all, the castles in the area. These included the vast and impregnable fortress of

Chloumoutzi situated on a headland near Glarentza. To seal the pact, Constantine married Tocco's niece Maddelena in July 1428, whereupon Carlo Tocco departed for Epiros and his capital city of Ioannina.²³

Such a complete victory, coming only a few years after the relinquishment of Thessalonica and the humiliating treaty of 1424, is striking. True, it was achieved against a much weaker foe than Murad II, but the speed and efficiency with which Tocco was brought to heel suggests that even in its last decades Byzantium was not completely moribund as a military power. It is quite clear from the account of the affair by George Sphrantzes, however, that this had not been a nationalistic struggle to free Greece from Latin rule but a way of assuaging dynastic ambition. Once Glarentza and the area around had been secured, it became the basis of a new appanage for Constantine, padded out with a number of towns, fortresses and tracts of land that were handed over by his elder brother, the Despot Theodore. Not that this arrangement was entirely amicable. Sphrantzes implies that at an earlier stage, Theodore had been talking about following the example of his brother Andronicus and taking monastic vows, in which case Constantine would have come to control the entire Byzantine Morea. Then, infuriatingly, Theodore changed his mind and Constantine had to content himself with rather less land, to his evident displeasure.

In the same way, John VIII took advantage of the conquests in the Peloponnese to carve out a modest territory for his youngest brother, Thomas. He was first given the castle of Kalavryta to the north of Mistra in 1428 when John was still in the Morea. Later, following the emperor's departure and the capture of Patras, Constantine handed over Glarentza and the surrounding area to Thomas and added Kalavryta to his own remaining lands. Shortly afterwards Thomas made an advantageous marriage to Caterina Zaccaria, the daughter of the Prince of Achaia, Centurione II, thus becoming the heir to Centurione's remaining lands. That gave Thomas his appanage and in

August 1430 he received the title of despot to go with it. All John's brothers had now been provided for.²⁴

Nevertheless the offensive continued and further gains were made in the Peloponnese over the next few years. During the summer of 1428, following their triumph at Glarentza, John VIII and Constantine, accompanied by their younger brother Thomas marched north on Patras. Like Glarentza, Patras was a port but its significance was ecclesiastical as well as commercial. Following the capture of Constantinople in 1204 and the subsequent partition of the Byzantine empire, the Pope had created the archdiocese of Patras to serve the principality of Achaia. He probably chose Patras because the city was reputedly the site of the martyrdom of St Andrew and its cathedral housed the Apostle's head as a precious relic. Hence Patras became an outpost of Catholic ecclesiastical domination in an area where the vast majority of the population was Orthodox.

There is little sign, however, that the Palaiologos brothers saw their attack on Patras as some kind of crusade against the Latins. After all, the ruler of the city and its archbishop was a relative of theirs by marriage: Pandolfo Malatesta, the brother of Theodore Palaiologos's wife Cleope. They certainly did not press home the attack with great zeal in the summer of 1428. The town's defences proved too strong for an assault to be launched and all the besiegers achieved was the capture of three young members of the garrison. So they allowed themselves to be bought off with a promise of an annual tribute of 500 florins, to be paid to Constantine. John retired first to Mistra then to Corinth, from where he returned by ship to Constantinople. Constantine remained in his new base at Chloumoutzi for he had not given up the dream of conquering Patras, even if John had. His reasons for wanting to do so are perfectly clear. According to George Sphrantzes, he and Constantine met secretly in the harbour town of Vostitza on the Gulf of Corinth to plan the attack. If it was successful, Constantine would give his appanage of

Mesembria back to his brother John. If the attack failed, Constantine would keep Mesembria and the areas he received under the settlement with Tocco but would hand back the other areas in the Peloponnese that he had received from the Despot Theodore. In short, the rationale, behind the campaign was to provide living space for the Palaiologoi.

With the arrival of spring in 1429, the attack began. Constantine summoned the local lords to gather with their troops at Chloumoutzi, prior to marching north, although the ultimate destination was not announced for the time being. On the way, Constantine's force was met by some representatives of the Greek population of Patras. It had been hoped that they would suggest some way into the city, perhaps by opening a postern gate in the walls, but it turned out that they had little to offer. By now, moreover, the element of surprise had been lost for the garrison of Patras had received intelligence that the army was marching towards them. A delegation was sent out to request that Constantine make clear his intention and its members were told frankly that Constantine had come to receive the surrender of their city. On Palm Sunday, the army arrived before the city walls and set up camp.

The following day, almost by accident, hostilities began. Some enemy horsemen were spotted riding out of one of the city gates, so Constantine, Sphrantzes and a few others galloped off in pursuit. When the fleeing horsemen re-entered by another gate, their pursuers found themselves confronted with a phalanx of archers and cross-bowmen. Constantine's horse was hit by an arrow and went down, prompting the defenders to sally forth in an attempt to capture him. Sphrantzes rushed to his defence, allowing the despot to disentangle himself from his dead horse and escape on foot. Sphrantzes, on the other hand, found himself surrounded. He fought on desperately until his horse collapsed from its wounds, whereupon he was seized and dragged into the city. He was thrown into a dark cellar 'full of ants, weevils and mice', where his leg was chained to a post.

This imprisonment came to an end some forty days later when Constantine's investment of Patras was brought to a conclusion in the anticlimactic way of most medieval sieges. The garrison commander asked Sphrantzes to write a letter to Constantine, conveying their terms. Archbishop Pandolfo had been away from the city when the siege began and was supposed to be organising a religious force. It was agreed now that if he failed to return during the month of May then the city would surrender. June came and there was no sign of the archbishop. So the city officials came out to Constantine's camp followed by a procession of citizens and handed over the keys. Constantine then rode into Patras along streets strewn with flowers. The moment was rather spoiled by some of the archbishop's men who shut themselves in the castle above the town and fired crossbow bolts down into the crowd. It took another twelve months to persuade them to surrender. In spite of this annoyance, the capture of Patras was a triumph for the empire and within a few years of it, almost the entire Peloponnese was in Byzantine hands.²⁵

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Gratifying though this victory might have been and useful though it was in providing land for Byzantine princes, it was also very dangerous. By attacking a papal fief and dispossessing its archbishop in this way, Constantine could not have failed to anger the Pope. Yet it was to the Pope that he and John VIII, like their father before them, constantly looked to provide moral backing for western military action against the Ottomans. The Venetians were also annoyed by the coup because they had been negotiating with the Pope and the archbishop of Patras to take the city over as they had Thessalonica.²⁶ More serious still was the reaction from Adrianople, where Sultan Murad II was likely to see the conquest of Glarentza and Patras as a breach of the treaty of 1424.

Murad's anger made itself felt even before Patras fell. In the interval between the agreement of the terms of surrender and the actual handover, an Ottoman envoy had arrived at the despot's camp. He carried an ultimatum that if the attack continued, an Ottoman army would be despatched to relieve the city for, he claimed, the inhabitants had been in touch with the sultan and had offered to become his vassals. Constantine lied his way out of trouble by assuring the envoy that the siege had been lifted.²⁷ Sooner or later, of course, Murad would find out what had really happened, so once Patras was safely in Constantine's hands he despatched George Sphrantzes to Adrianople to reconcile the sultan to the coup. Sphrantzes had got no further than the Venetian town of Lepanto across the Gulf of Corinth when he encountered some Ottoman envoys who were heading to Constantine's camp. Clearly word of the surrender agreement had reached Murad very quickly, for the envoys bore their master's stern command that Constantine should not under any circumstances accept the keys of Patras. Seeing that Sphrantzes was on his way to the sultan, the envoys journeyed back with him. He passed through Constantinople where he picked up Mark Iagaris as fellow ambassador and then finally reached Adrianople.

At the best of times audiences at the Ottoman court were slow and ceremonial affairs, and it is likely that Sphrantzes and Iagaris would have had to have stayed in Adrianople for several weeks before they received a response. Envoys were expected to wait around in the audience chamber for hours until the sultan chose to show himself, as another visitor to Murad II's court remembered:

At length he appeared. His dress was, as usual, a crimson satin robe, over which he had, by way of mantle, another green figured satin, lined with sable. . . . He walked across an angle of the court to a gallery, where a seat had been prepared for him. It was a kind

of couch covered with velvet, and four or five steps to it. He seated himself on it, like to our tailors when they are going to work . . .

Even when the sultan was present, business proceeded slowly. The ambassadors were presented but then everything stopped for lunch:

A silken napkin was attached to the prince, and a round piece of thin leather was placed before him . . . then some dressed meat was brought to him in two gilded dishes. When he was served, his officers went and took the tin dishes I have spoken of and distributed them to the persons in the hall, one dish among four . . . but before all were served it was necessary to take away, for the prince had not been inclined to eat.²⁸

Given the circumstances that brought Sphrantzes and Iagaris to the Ottoman court, it is likely that their reception was rather frosty. As was customary, the envoys received their answer from the chief vizier, Ibrahim Pasha, rather than from the sultan himself. The message was a blunt one that Patras must be given up immediately. Sphrantzes played for time, protesting that he did not dare return to Constantine with so uncompromising a message and requesting that an Ottoman envoy return with him to Patras to convey the sultan's command. Although Iagaris accused Sphrantzes of failing in the mission, the tactic worked. Sphrantzes left Adrianople accompanied by a Turkish official and for the next twelve months, negotiations were artfully drawn out allowing Constantine to consolidate his position in Patras. Murad, it would seem, was not interested in enforcing his surrender demand at that time.²⁹

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One reason for Murad's forbearance might have been that he was more interested in another objective. He had never been reconciled to Venice's takeover of Thessalonica and his blockade of the city had not been lifted after 1423. After all, since Thessalonica was now a Venetian city, it was not covered by the treaty of 1424 with the Byzantines. So the siege went on and despite all Venice's efforts to keep the inhabitants supplied by sea, not all the ships got through. One merchant vessel with a cargo of grain foundered within site of the harbour but did not sink, so that from the Sea Walls the citizens could watch powerlessly as its cargo slowly rotted. Food was now constantly in short supply and Archbishop Symeon described the plight of the people of Thessalonica:

Bread was completely lacking and most of those who dwelt in the city did not even have edible vegetables but were taking wild radishes and other uncultivated plants to eat, things which cannot sustain the human body, because they were at a loss and were forced by famine to do so.

So bad had matters become that many of them were escaping by night to the Turkish lines, letting themselves down from the walls on ropes. Even some of the Venetian guards joined the exodus.³⁰ In desperation, the Greek citizens of Thessalonica sent a delegation to Venice in July 1429 to make the doge and Senate aware of their plight. They were sympathetically received, especially as it emerged that the Venetian administration in Thessalonica had been falling down on the job. The members of the delegation were assured that:

Our government, seeing the state of shortage of foodstuffs in which the city finds itself and the poverty of those faithful servants, has made provision for the distribution each month as an act of charity of two thousand measures of grain in the city by our Rectors there

who we believed were making this very same provision and we are displeased that they have not duly carried out our provision . . .

Whatever the good intentions of the government in Venice, nothing much changed in Thessalonica. Murad was well aware of the situation and on 6 March 1426 he ordered his commanders to launch a full-scale attack on the city's defences. The Venetians estimated the attackers at 30,000, which if true would have given them an immense numerical superiority over the defenders. Incredibly, the attack was beaten off, partly because five fully armed galleys had just arrived from Crete with reinforcements but also thanks to the valour of the soldiers on the walls. Turkish losses were estimated at two thousand dead.³¹

At this point Murad II might have given up as he had at Constantinople in 1422. He showed no signs whatsoever of doing so, maintaining his purpose year after year with bulldog tenacity. The sultan seems to have taken the decision to capture Thessalonica, whatever the cost. With the Venetians in control, however, there was no likelihood that the city would open its gates without a fight as it had in 1387. There was no alternative to another direct assault.

In the spring of 1430 word reached Thessalonica that Murad was marching out of Adrianople with a very large army. It soon became clear that he was heading towards the city and orders were given to put the defences in readiness. Wooden shelters were erected on the battlements to protect the defenders against arrows shot from below and to provide platforms from which missiles could be hurled down on the attackers. The city's marketplace was moved nearer to the walls so that the soldiers would be able to buy food without having to leave their posts for long. The walls were manned by both Venetians and Greeks, although the Venetian authorities were careful to keep them apart and appointed a band of rough brigands brought in from the countryside to watch the Greeks for any signs of treachery. The precaution was not unjustified for

it was discovered that some Greeks had been digging tunnels under the walls either to escape the city or to betray it to the Turks.³²

The sultan arrived at the walls of Thessalonica on 26 March and only then did it become clear to the defenders how vast an army was about to be unleashed on them, 'like swarms of bees thirsting eagerly for our blood'. Murad's force was well equipped too, with siege engines that were dragged up to the walls by camels and with what an eyewitness among the defenders, John Anagnostes, described as 'man-made thunder of stone', by which he probably meant cannon. In spite of all these preparations, however, Murad was hoping for a quick victory by attacking from another direction: by sea against the thinly manned Sea Walls. His plan was betrayed to the Venetians by a Christian deserter and the Venetians were ready and waiting when the Turkish ships arrived. The attack was driven off without difficulty.

Three days after Murad's arrival, before sunrise on 29 March, the assault by land began, concentrated on the walls on the eastern side of the city that were in the worst repair. From the first it was apparent that the Ottomans' greatest advantage was not any superior military technology but their overwhelming numbers. According to John Anagnostes:

The enemy attacked us at separate points, replacing each other because their force was large so that those who had done their work were replaced by men who were unwearied and they provided a respite for one another.

The defenders were also hampered by the continuous hail of missiles, both arrows and stones from the cannon, coming up at them from the ground 'so that no one could even expose a hand over the battlements' to throw a stone. Under this covering fire, the Turks rushed forward with picks in the hope of prising stones from the base of the wall and

undermining it. Those who brought dislodged stones back to their commander were given a prize such as a rope of silk.

With the defenders still constantly harassed by fire from below, another wave of Turks now came forward armed with scaling ladders. With these they attempted to clamber up to the battlements, although many of them were sent plunging back to the ground by rocks heaved over the parapet above. But with so many assailants, it was inevitable that sooner or later some of them would get through. One Turk, a knife gripped between his teeth, managed to clamber up his ladder unseen and to gain a foothold on the battlements. There he found only one dying Venetian whose head he promptly lopped off and tossed over the wall to his comrades below, a signal for them to bring their ladders and follow his lead. Meanwhile others had succeeded in making breaches in the walls and were scrambling in through the gaps.

By mid-morning it was clear that all was lost and the entire Ottoman army was pouring into Thessalonica. The Venetians on the walls fled down the hill into the lower city in the hope of getting on board one of the ships that were at anchor in the harbour. The Greeks fled in the same direction, some trying to reach their homes and families, some to gain admittance to the tower of Samareia near the waterfront, which could still be held. When they arrived, however, they discovered that the tower had been locked and barred on the orders of some high-ranking Venetians who had got there first and who used its mole to reach the ships. Most of those who escaped were Venetians. The Greeks were therefore left to face the fury of the Turks. The victorious soldiers were now fanning out through the city seeking valuable captives, who could be sold as slaves, and any moveable wealth that they could get their hands on. They paid particular attention to churches and monasteries because they had found out that many of the Greeks had hidden their money and valuables in tombs. The cathedral of St Demetrius had an added attraction in the shrine of the city's patron saint, which not only

exuded the famous myrrh but was overlaid with gold and silver and studded with pearls and precious stones. The valuables were stripped off and the marble shrine smashed. The pillage went on for three days, during which a large proportion of the population of Thessalonica was rounded up to be sold into slavery. Murad himself chose as his part of the booty the marble floor slabs of the churches and monasteries, and he sent them off to Adrianople to be used in a new bath house that he was constructing. There was, however, one bright spot in the chaos, wrote a Venetian: the Turks were so busy rounding up Greek women that more Venetians were able to reach the ships and escape.³³

Not surprisingly there was deep shock in Venice when the news of the disaster arrived, though typically its impact was judged in monetary terms:

The community of Venice has spent in all, counting soldiers on land and men at sea, with many shiploads of grain and other foodstuffs, and the arming of galleys, in total 740,000 ducats.³⁴

Although Thessalonica was no longer under Byzantine rule at the time of its fall, the reaction in Constantinople and the Byzantine Peloponnese was much the same. After all, the Byzantines had twisted the lion's tail over Patras and got away with it. Now, with Thessalonica in his hands, Murad could deal out belated punishment for Constantine Palaiologos's seizure of Patras in contravention of the sultan's direct command. In the spring of 1431 he sent his general Turahan down to the Isthmus of Corinth to demolish the Hexamilion fortifications that Constantine had tried to rebuild, a task the general's troops accomplished with ease.³⁵ Now the Byzantines knew what would happen if the sultan ever did decide to concentrate his full resources against them. There were other lessons to be drawn from the disaster. The trouble was that the Byzantines could not agree on what they were.



A Council and a Crusade

LIKE THE DISASTROUS war against Murad II of 1421–4, the fall of Thessalonica reignited the urgent debate on how to deal with the Ottomans and how to relate to the Catholic west. Those who believed that accommodation rather than resistance was the only way of defusing the Ottoman threat must have taken careful heed of what had happened at Thessalonica. It certainly showed just how ineffective Latin help was against the Ottomans. For all their naval power, at the end of the day the Venetians could not match the military might of the sultan. The Venetians could, moreover, be blamed for the horrors perpetrated upon the Greek population of the city following its capture. Murad had deeply resented the Venetian takeover of Thessalonica and had refused to negotiate with them on the issue, but he had hesitated before launching the final assault. He had made strenuous efforts to persuade the Greeks in the city to abandon the Venetians and open the gates to him. He had sent some Christians forward to within shouting distance of the defenders to urge them to give up, and they were followed by heralds who promised that the lives, liberty and possessions of the inhabitants would be safe if they did so. The Greek citizens had not responded to this opportunity out of fear of the Venetians. With the overtures rejected the attack went ahead,

and since they had been rejected Murad allowed his soldiers to sack and pillage Thessalonica to their hearts' content. Stories of the alacrity with which the Venetians fled to their ships, leaving the Greeks to the mercy of the Turks, only helped to fuel the resentment.¹

Only a few months later another city fell to the Ottomans in quite different circumstances. Murad sent his army from Thessalonica towards Carlo Tocco's capital of Ioannina, now ruled by his nephew, Carlo II (r.1429–1448). It was exactly the same situation with a majority Greek and Orthodox population in a Latin-ruled city, and the Turkish general, Sinan Pasha, gave the populace the same opportunity to open the gates without a fight. In this case they accepted and received a written assurance from Sinan that they 'need have no fear that they will be taken captive or their children abducted, that churches will be destroyed or turned into mosques. . . . Ancestral rights, property and personal possessions will be guaranteed without question'. When the Turks took possession of the city on 9 October 1430 there was no repeat of what had happened at Thessalonica in the spring and Sinan's promises were kept. Little wonder then that many Byzantines now concluded that there was no point in resisting or provoking the Ottomans and that any help from the Latins was likely only to make matters worse.²

There were, however, some Byzantines who drew quite the opposite lesson from the fall of Thessalonica. For them the disaster proved just how completely the Ottomans had recovered from the disaster of 1402 and how overwhelmingly powerful they now were. The best response was not passivity but to match the might of the sultan by attracting large-scale military help from the Christian west. There were a number of reasons why individuals should incline to this view. For some it was a matter of intellectual sympathy, as it had been for Demetrius Kydones. One of them was the young George Scholarios. Like Kydones he was well versed in the works of Thomas Aquinas and

St Augustine, so much so that during the 1430s he was accused by some unnamed critics of 'Latinism'. For men like Scholarios, the Latins were natural allies, fellow Christians with whom to make common cause against the infidel enemy. Then there were those whose financial interests, tied as they were to the trading networks of Venice and Genoa, inclined them to support rapprochement with the west. Finally, there was a group who believed that the pro-Latin view made the best strategic sense. It was well known that the emir of Karaman, Ibrahim Bey (r.1424–1464), and other minor Turkish rulers of Asia Minor would rise against the Ottomans, if an attack were launched against them from the west. Fighting a war on two fronts, Murad II might find himself facing the kind of disaster that had overtaken his grandfather Bayezid in 1402. It was probably this sort of reasoning that appealed to John VIII and his brother Constantine, and with the emperor in their ranks the pro-Latin group had the strongest influence on policy even if they were a minority among the Byzantine population as a whole.³

The urgent question now was how to attract western military intervention on the scale that was needed to push the Ottomans out of the Balkans. Efforts so far had elicited only sympathy, some money and some very small contributions to the defence of Constantinople. John VIII and his advisers therefore came round to the view that the only way in which significant assistance could be obtained was by finding a means of bringing the schism between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches to an end. Only then would the Pope throw himself wholeheartedly into the task of rousing western Christendom to a crusade against the Ottomans. This was a radical departure from Byzantine policy to date. Manuel II had been of the opinion that Church union should be talked about as a diplomatic tool but not actually carried out. No doubt fearing the reaction of the Byzantine population to an attempt at union, he had advised his son John that:

the impious dread the day we come to terms and unite with the Franks; they believe that if this happens, they will suffer because of us a great misfortune at the hands of the Christians of the west. Well then, as far as this synod is concerned, continue to study and plan it, especially when you need to frighten the impious. But do not bring it about . . .

Even in his father's lifetime, John had made it clear that he disagreed, and while he was in Hungary in 1424 he had discussed the union of the Churches with the king of Hungary, Sigismund. Now that he ruled in his own right and the extent of the Ottoman recovery had been demonstrated so starkly, John began to signal his willingness to participate in a Church council to discuss union, although he was very careful to maintain ostensible friendship with the Ottoman sultan under the treaty of 1424, just as Manuel II had with Mehmed I.⁴

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The first moves were put out to Rome even before the fall of Thessalonica in the spring of 1430, but the negotiations for a council of the Church proved protracted and difficult. They started well, and early in that year negotiations were entrusted to an embassy led by Mark Iagaris, the same man who had accompanied George Sphrantzes to the court of Murad II in 1429 in the vain attempt to secure the sultan's blessing for the seizure of Patras. Sphrantzes did not like Iagaris, whom he accused of being critical and unsupportive of the mission to Murad, but Iagaris seems to have carried out his difficult mission to Rome well enough. He secured an agreement from the Pope that a council should be convened to bring about the union of the Churches. The council was to meet in some city on the east coast of Italy and the expense of transporting and accommodating a Byzantine delegation of

up to seven hundred people should be met by the Roman Church. The Pope also undertook to provide two galleys and three hundred cross-bowmen as reinforcements for the defence of Constantinople.⁵

When Iagaris and his companions returned, John VIII called a meeting of his advisers in his mother's palace to discuss the Pope's offer. It seemed to be a reasonable one, conceding the Byzantine point that only a general council of the Church could bring about reunion and at the same time offering some practical financial and military help, albeit limited. The aged patriarch of Constantinople, Joseph II (r.1416–1439), objected to the council being held on Latin territory rather than in the Byzantine capital as had been hoped, but in the end it was decided to accept. Iagaris headed back to Rome with the Byzantine response but then he hit a snag. He arrived to find that a new Pope had since been elected, Eugenius IV (r.1431–1447), who was rather more obdurate than his predecessor. No sooner had the Byzantine emissaries entered the audience chamber and given the customary salutations than Eugenius abruptly demanded to know whether the emperor had yet returned Patras to its rightful owner, Archbishop Pandolfo. When he learned that the city was still in Byzantine hands, the Pope asked how they could come now to ask for a council. Iagaris was stunned into silence and had to be prompted by one of his fellow envoys into responding that they had come to discuss not particular issues like this but the general questions that divided the Church. When those were resolved, the minor matters would surely be settled as well. It was a feeble answer and Iagaris must have known that if the surrender of Patras were made a condition of the council, then it was likely that the negotiations would remain in deadlock.⁶

Fortunately for the Byzantines, Pope Eugenius was not in nearly as strong a position as his bullish question about Patras might have suggested. He was facing considerable popular discontent in Rome. Not long after Iagaris's second visit, Eugenius lost control of the city

when a revolt broke out in protest at the shortages caused by the war with the duke of Milan. The Pope had to flee from his palace by night disguised as a friar and managed to escape from Rome by sailing down the Tiber in a boat while arrows were loosed off at him by his enemies on the bank. He managed to reach Pisa and from there travelled to Florence where he was made welcome by the leading citizens. For the next few years the exiled Eugenius and his court resided in the monastery of Santa Maria Novella.⁷ That was not the end of his troubles, for Eugenius was being challenged more widely than just on the streets of Rome. The schism between the popes of Rome and Avignon which had divided the western Church in Manuel II's day had come to an end in 1417, but another challenge to papal power had opened up in the so-called Conciliar Movement. During the long years of the papal schism, many prominent laymen and ecclesiastics in the west had come to the conclusion that supreme authority in matters of faith should not lie with the Pope alone but with a general council of the Church, and they compelled a reluctant Pope to convene such a council. It met at the Swiss city of Basel in 1431 under the presidency of Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini (1398–1444) to consider the problems of the Church. Relations between Pope and council soon became strained and not long after his election Eugenius IV declared the Council of Basel dissolved. The Council, however, enjoyed the support of fifteen of Eugenius's twenty-one cardinals and it continued to sit in spite of the Pope's command. In the end, he was forced to back down and had to withdraw his earlier dissolution. The Council of Basel then settled down to discuss how to cut back papal financial resources and administrative powers, blithely ignoring Eugenius's angry protests.

The Byzantines were past masters at exploiting disunity and they did not fail to do so now. If the Pope would not give them what they wanted, then perhaps the Council of Basel would. Early in 1433

representatives from Basel arrived in Constantinople to discuss union of the Churches, apparently without making any mention of the thorny issue of Patras. John VIII responded by sending a delegation to the Council of Basel in late 1433. This time the leader was Demetrius Palaiologos Metochites and he was accompanied by Isidore, abbot of the monastery of St Demetrius. Their journey to Basel was beset by a series of mishaps. They first set out in November 1433 but were driven back to Constantinople by a violent storm in the Black Sea. Departing again in January 1434, their ship was driven ashore by another storm and they had to journey overland through Hungary instead. On the road they were ambushed by bandits and relieved of all their money, so when they got to Buda they had to borrow further funds before they could reach their destination. There had been those who had fared worse. An ambassador sent to Venice in 1397 had perished when his ship went down in the Adriatic. Such were the perils of serving the emperor.⁸

Once they were in Basel, however, Metochites and Isidore were able to come to a satisfactory agreement with the council which offered similar terms to that of the Pope, except that the council for reunion should be held at Basel rather than in Italy. With the agreement made, the Byzantines could now play the council off against the Pope in the hope of getting better terms. In the end they chose those offered by Eugenius rather than the Council of Basel. In the summer of 1437 an agreement was finally reached that the council would meet the following year in the Italian city of Ferrara. The Byzantine delegation would be conveyed there in a fleet of papal ships and their expenses would be met by the Pope. The emperor would still have liked the council to be held in Constantinople but his bargaining power was limited. At least there was no further mention of Patras.

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With the time and place of the council fixed, the members of the delegation had to be chosen. After all, it was important that the Byzantine case should be put as forcefully as possible and that the council did not look like a surrender on Latin terms. John VIII decided that he would lead it himself and that his brother Constantine should stay behind to govern Constantinople in his absence, aided by Loukas Notaras and George Sphrantzes. Naturally, clergy would make up the majority of the delegation to an ecclesiastical council so the patriarch, Joseph II, was to go along with a bevy of archbishops and bishops such as Mark Eugenikos, archbishop of Ephesus, and the monk Bessarion, who had just been appointed archbishop of Nicaea. Isidore, the abbot of St Demetrius who had travelled to the Council of Basel, had recently been appointed archbishop of Kiev and he was despatched to organise a Russian delegation to the council. There was a host of lesser clergy, such as Sylvester Syropoulos who held the office of Great Ekklesiarchis of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia and who later wrote an account of the council, and a contingent of monks, including two representatives of Mount Athos. There were also plenty of laymen in the delegation. Some were probably included because they had been involved in the earlier discussion leading up to the council, such as Mark Iagaris and Demetrius Metochites, while others, such as Theodore Karystinos and George Philanthropinos, were experienced diplomats and politicians. There was a contingent of intellectuals such as George Scholarios, who possessed an unrivalled knowledge of Latin theology, George Gemistos, a Peloponnesian landowner and admirer of Plato, and probably John Argyropoulos, the judge and teacher.⁹

Perhaps the most surprising addition to the list was the emperor's brother, Demetrius. On his return from his travels in 1427, Demetrius had settled down to rule his appanage of Limnos quietly enough and in March 1436 he married a lady called Zoe Paraspondylas.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is likely that Demetrius remained under a cloud for his

actions in 1423 and for his Turkish sympathies that were so at odds with the policy his brother was now pursuing. John might have felt that it was too dangerous to leave Demetrius behind while the emperor was at the council, lest he plan to do what his cousin John VII had done in Manuel II's absence and enter into negotiations with the sultan.

That consideration was particularly important because the diplomatic manoeuvrings between emperor, Pope and council had been watched very carefully from Adrianople. In theory, a council to discuss theological and ecclesiastical matters represented no violation of the treaty of 1424, but Murad was perfectly well aware that Church union might well be the precursor of a western crusade against the Ottomans. To allay his suspicions, John VIII despatched another member of the Iagaris family, Andronicus, to the Ottoman court to assure him that the council was simply an ecclesiastical one. After hearing Iagaris's version of events, Murad did not voice his suspicions outright but he was unimpressed and said so:

It does not seem a good idea to me, to labour so hard and to spend so much money. What will he win? I am here: if [the emperor] is in need of aspers for his expenses or for any other funds for his maintenance, I am prepared to serve him.

John went ahead with his preparations anyway, in spite of Murad's evident disapproval, and serious consideration was given at the Ottoman court to taking advantage of the emperor's absence and mounting a pre-emptive strike on Constantinople. There was, however, a restraining influence in the person of Murad's recently appointed chief vizier, Çandarlı Halil Pasha. Halil had distinguished himself in the wars against Jüneid of Smyrna in the 1420s and Murad reposed great confidence in him. His advice was that:

If you attack the City your action will cause the emperor to tell the Latins that he will adopt whatever they tell him to do. . . . Give up the idea and watch the emperor's actions . . .¹¹

Halil's view prevailed, although the sultan made his displeasure known in various ways. The Turks made difficulties when the fleet bearing John VIII and the Byzantine delegation passed through the Dardanelles, preventing the crews from replenishing their water supplies, possibly on Murad's orders. After the emperor had departed, the sultan made a show of strength outside the walls of Constantinople, marching past with a strong force and prompting the despot Constantine to man the defences. In the event, no attack came and the Turks moved on.¹²

Halil's advice to Murad was not an isolated instance. He had gained a reputation at the Ottoman court for being friendly towards Christians and always urged restraint towards Constantinople. He had financial incentives to do so. Like many Byzantine aristocrats, he made money from commercial transactions with Italian merchants operating out of Constantinople, buying and selling imported commodities. He was also in receipt of regular bribes from the Byzantine emperor, who knew the value of his influence at the Ottoman court. According to one probably apocryphal tale, the vizier received his retainer in the form of gold coins hidden in the bellies of fish that were delivered to his house. The Byzantines had never been too fussy about the methods they used provided they worked, and in this case the money seems to have been well spent.¹³

With Murad apparently mollified, the delegation chosen and the place and date of the council agreed, matters moved relatively swiftly. The promised ships arrived in the Golden Horn on 4 September 1437, and on 27 November they set out for Venice with the emperor and the numerous delegates on board. From there they sailed down the Aegean, putting in at the ports of Kenchreai and Modon on the way, before

arriving in Venice in early February 1438. From there the Byzantine delegation was conveyed in ships down the River Po to Ferrara where the first session of the council opened in the cathedral on 9 April. Several sessions were held before the summer heat prompted a recess. By the time discussions were resumed in October, plague had broken out in Ferrara and the Pope was seeking another venue for the council. In February 1439 all the delegates left Ferrara and moved to Florence where they were hosted by the wealthy banker and de facto ruler of the city, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464). It was at Florence that the council was to reach its conclusion and the union of the Churches was finally to be agreed.

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In the months before union was achieved, there was plenty to occupy the members of the Byzantine delegation apart from dry debates about theology. For those from the depressed and run-down capital in particular, the obvious opulence of the cities of Italy must have been a revelation, just as it had been to Manuel Chrysoloras forty years before. Venice, the commercial capital of Europe, was adorned with tall houses and palaces 'with many storeys and chimneys and furnished with rich porticoes and windows towards the streets'. Ferrara, which was ruled by Marquis Nicolò III d'Este (1383–1441), also boasted fine buildings and streets and drew its wealth from the rich agricultural lands of the Po valley that surrounded it. Florence was the centre of the artistic and intellectual developments of the Renaissance and its skyline was dominated by the splendid dome of its cathedral, which had recently been completed by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and paid for by the Medici family. The reaction of the Byzantines was typical of that of visitors from a poor country in a rich one. Sylvester Syropoulos, when he arrived at the lodging provided for the Byzantine clergy in the

monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, was astonished by the abundance of the provisions that had been made ready for them – barrels of wine, supplies of bread and fish, lamps and candles of all sizes – although he was less impressed by the hospitality at Ferrara. It is likely that even John VIII enjoyed a rather better lifestyle in Italy during the council than he normally had in the cramped and crumbling palace of Blachernae. In Venice a splendid mansion with thirty-six beds was put at his disposal, and another was provided for his brother Demetrius. At Ferrara the emperor was assigned a very pleasant riverside palace belonging to the marquis.¹⁴

It was only to be expected that John would make the most of the opportunities available to him while he was in Italy. He was certainly involved with the work of the council. Although, as a layman, he did not contribute directly to the theological debates, he did attend some of them and he worked hard to persuade the clergy in the direction of an agreement. He does seem, however, to have spent much more time on his favourite pastime of hunting. No sooner had he reached Ferrara than he applied to the Pope for a supply of horses. When they finally arrived after three months, they proved to be quite unsuitable, so John purchased some of his own from Isidore of Kiev's delegation that had just arrived from Russia. He then installed himself and a select band of followers in a convent some nine kilometres outside Ferrara and hunted in the countryside round about. So regularly did he indulge in his hobby that the marquis of Ferrara had to complain about the damage being done to his subjects' property. John's mind was so fixed on the chase that he even used to take his favourite hunting dog with him into the council sessions. It was accustomed to lie on a footstool next to his throne and on one occasion whined and whimpered throughout the emperor's speech in spite of all efforts to silence it.¹⁵

These activities were not curtailed by criticism but by the emperor's state of health. By the time of the council, John was not a well man.

Already some seven years earlier he had been out of circulation for an entire month with a mystery illness and the doctors had despaired of his life. He had been unwell when the fleet had arrived in Venice, so that he had not been able to accept the doge's invitation to visit him on his barge. In the spring of 1439 he was struck down by severe gout in his legs. The pain was so bad that when he rode out of Florence with his suite one day to visit the shrine of the Virgin's girdle at Pistoia, he was unable to make the return journey and a gentleman in the village of Peretola offered his home for the emperor to rest in. To spare his legs, John had to ride his horse right into the house and did not dismount until he reached the dining room. On occasions like this, he had to content himself with playing backgammon.¹⁶

There was, however, another matter to which John did give his full attention during his time in Italy, and that was the economic well-being of his empire. During August of 1439 he concluded a commercial treaty with the government of Florence, granting to the commune the trading privileges formerly enjoyed by Pisa, which was now under Florentine rule. Merchants from Florence were henceforth allowed to import and export goods in the emperor's territories in return for the payment of a modest customs duty. Florentine galleys were soon regular visitors to Constantinople and to the recently conquered ports of Patras and Glarentza in the Peloponnese, generating income for the emperor and the despots and assisting the local economy by shipping Byzantine cochineal and wine to Italy. The treaty also helped to dent the Venetian and Genoese monopoly of trade in the area.¹⁷

Like their sovereign, some members of the Byzantine delegation took advantage of their stay in Italy to attend to their business interests. One of them was George Philanthropinos. He was clearly much wealthier than most of the Byzantine delegates, who were dependent on the Pope and the communes of Ferrara and Florence for their food and accommodation. When his relative Patriarch Joseph died in June 1439,

Philanthropinos paid fifty ducats for an annual Mass to be said in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence for the repose of his soul. One suspects that in order to lay his hands on such a sum, Philanthropinos must have had substantial investments in Italy, possibly at the Bank of St George in Genoa or in Florence itself. It was probably during the council that George Philanthropinos deposited 3,000 ducats' worth of gold with a Roman merchant, no doubt with a view to keeping it safe should events take a turn for the worse back in Constantinople.¹⁸

For the more erudite lay members of the delegation, especially those with pro-Latin sympathies, there were other extra-curricular activities. A protracted stay in Florence, the intellectual heart of Italy, was a marvellous opportunity to make contacts. It may have been during the council that John Argyropoulos first met Cosimo de' Medici, who was later to secure him a post at the University of Florence. Bessarion, the newly appointed archbishop of Nicaea, was also in demand from educated Italians. Cardinal Ambrogio Traversari, who had earlier studied Greek with Demetrius Skaranos, was delighted with the young Greek archbishop and declared that he was 'burning with intelligence'. He was intrigued to know what books Bessarion possessed in ancient Greek and was disappointed to discover that only a few had accompanied their owner to Florence because he had left them at Modon:

I proceeded, however, to ask questions, and he stated that he had left there two big volumes of Strabo. . . . How ill I took it that he had not brought the volumes along! But I had to conceal the fact. I am led to hope nevertheless that they are to be brought . . .¹⁹

In view of their warm reception, some Byzantines were rather reluctant to leave. Argyropoulos did not return immediately to Constantinople with the rest of the Byzantine delegation in October 1439. Instead he moved north to Padua where the former pupil of Manuel Chrysoloras,

Pallas Strozzi, was living in exile. There Argyropoulos both taught and studied at the university, obtaining a degree in arts and medicine, and was generously paid to read Aristotle to Strozzi out loud. He did not return to Constantinople until about 1444.²⁰ Bessarion, too, was seduced by the bright lights of Italy. Shortly before the Byzantines left Florence, Pope Eugenius IV granted him an annual pension of 300 florins, to be raised to 800 if the Greek archbishop would reside at the papal curia. To provide an additional inducement, at the end of 1439 Eugenius appointed Bessarion a cardinal. Not surprisingly, although Bessarion returned to Constantinople with the emperor, he did not stay long. At some point in 1440, he returned to Italy and henceforth pursued his career at the papal court. It is not difficult to imagine how his departure would have been seen by those who had remained in Constantinople. As one anonymous anti-Unionist put it, 'he had fallen in love with the glory of men rather than that of God'.²¹

The deep impression that Italy made on some Byzantines during the council had the effect of widening the gulf between those who saw salvation in the west and those who did not. For not everyone was seduced. Although Sylvester Syropoulos noted the opulence and plenty in Venice, he reminded himself that many of the beautiful objects to be seen in St Mark's basilica there had originally been looted from Constantinople in 1204. Like Argyropoulos, George Gemistos found himself the object of eager curiosity in Florence and he was invited, probably by Cosimo de' Medici himself, to give some public lectures on the philosophy of Plato. Yet he seems to have evinced no desire to capitalise on his fame and to remain in Italy. John VIII's brother Demetrius spent most of his time at the council wishing that he were elsewhere. Both the emperor and others urged him to express an opinion during meetings, only to meet with a flat refusal. He persistently asked for permission to return to Venice, but John insisted that he remain. Perhaps the most striking example of someone who clearly

did not enjoy the council was George Scholarios. Learned in Latin theology and with many Latin friends, such as the Milanese Francesco Filelfo, Scholarios might have been expected to make the most of a stay in the intellectual centre of Europe. Yet in June 1439 when the despot Demetrius was finally allowed to leave and go to Venice, Scholarios accompanied him along with George Gemistos, which appears to indicate that neither of them was happy with the proceedings.²²

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At the end of the day, however, the aim of the council was not to discuss the Classics or to make commercial treaties but to secure agreement on how to bring the schism to an end. Given the long-standing tension, no one expected it to be easy, but the negotiations very nearly collapsed even before they began. As the Byzantine delegation travelled down the Po River to Ferrara by ship, those on the vessel with the patriarch Joseph on board noticed Theodore Karystinos galloping towards them on horseback along the bank. He brought disturbing news from the emperor in the lead vessel: Pope Eugenius had made it clear that when he met the Byzantine delegation, he would expect the patriarch to bow down and kiss his foot. The patriarch was horrified:

I do not owe him such a greeting since we are brothers; we should instead embrace and kiss each other in a fraternal fashion. Therefore I shall not do otherwise.

When the ships reached Ferrara, hasty consultations began with Eugenius's representatives, who insisted that the ancient custom of kissing the Pope's foot should be respected. The patriarch, supported by the emperor, stuck to his guns both on his own behalf and that of his entourage:

If the pope does not renounce the kissing of the foot from our bishops and my cross-bearing officials, it is impossible for me to disembark from the ship. It seems to me that the present gathering and discussion is not in accordance with God's will, which is why God has brought to us such a great obstacle, whence I shall return without fail, while still in the ship, before I am troubled also by other terrible things.

Rather grudgingly the Latins backed down, although Eugenius made his displeasure quite evident:

His Holiness the Pope, for the good of the peace and so that there should be no obstacle in this divine undertaking of the Union because of this reason, sets aside his own right and behold, he invites your great Holiness to come. However, he stipulates that he wished to prepare his reception of you in a different manner, for he thought to make this in public in the gathering of officials and with a great display. Now, on the other hand, he will not do this because he is greatly robbed of his own honour and is not willing to make this obvious to all. Instead he will receive you in his own apartment, with only the Cardinals present.²³

Protocol satisfied, the Byzantine delegation disembarked and could prepare for the formal debates. They were faced by an equally formidable array of Latin theologians and intellectuals, and to lead the debate with them the emperor appointed Bessarion and the archbishop of Ephesus, Mark Eugenikos. Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini and others spoke for the Latins. During the numerous sessions of the council, the delegates debated the two key issues of papal authority and the Filioque, that troublesome word which had been added to the Latin version of the Creed. They considered other matters too, such as the

doctrine of purgatory which was taught in the west but was not accepted by the Byzantines, and whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in the Eucharist. Inevitably, these issues gave infinite opportunity for theological hair-splitting. The session on Monday 2 March 1439, for example, focused on the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Ghost, which was central to any agreement on the Filioque. Mark Eugenikos asked the Dominican Giovanni di Montenero whether when he talked about the Holy Ghost proceeding from the Father and the Son, he meant the persons of the Father and the Son. Giovanni countered by saying that since the Holy Ghost proceeded from both, He therefore proceeded from one principle. So it went on, with each side chopping logic and firing off citations from the Fathers of the Church to support its point of view.²⁴

The most animated debates did not take place between the Byzantines and Latins but outside the formal sessions among the Greek delegates themselves. For a clear divide had opened up between those who saw the possibility and desirability of a compromise with the Latin position and those who were fiercely opposed to it. In the pro-Latin camp were Bessarion, archbishop of Nicaea, Isidore, archbishop of Kiev, and Dorotheos, archbishop of Mitylene. The strongest voice raised against union between the Churches was that of Mark Eugenikos of Ephesus. At one behind-the-scenes meeting, Mark made his position absolutely clear:

The Latins are not only schismatics but heretics and about this our Church is silent because they [the Latins] are many in number. . . . So we should not unite with them unless they delete the addition from the Creed as we do.

Isidore of Kiev, on the other hand, asserted that the Filioque was not in fact inconsistent with Orthodox theology:

The procession of the Holy Spirit is attributed also to the Son not only by the Western Fathers but also by the Eastern. Therefore it is right to agree with our own Fathers and unite with the Roman Church.²⁵

In the struggle between the opposing camps, the decisive factor had to be the attitude of the emperor. It was unthinkable that the Byzantine delegation should return to Constantinople without some kind of agreement having been made, not least because its members were dependent on the Pope for their food and transport. Failure to agree would also close the door to western military aid against the Ottomans. John therefore urged the bishops to come to a decision and to accept some kind of compromise. At the end of May 1439 he chaired a series of meetings with the Byzantine clergy to consider the arguments of the Latin side. These meetings culminated in a vote in which the majority of the delegates agreed that union with the Roman Church could be achieved on the basis of the theological compromise put forward.²⁶

A decree of Union was then drawn up with many of the thornier issues being carefully blurred. The Byzantine delegation agreed to recognise the procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son as from one principle and from one cause, so that the Latin addition of the word 'Filioque' was licit even though the Greek Creed that did not include it would not have to be altered. As regards Purgatory, a vague formula was arrived at that left the question open, and on leavened or unleavened bread it was agreed that either side could continue their current practice without criticising the other. Only on papal supremacy was an entirely unambivalent statement made:

The holy apostolic see and the Roman pontiff holds the primacy over the whole world and the Roman pontiff is the successor of blessed Peter prince of the Apostles, and he is the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole Church and the father and teacher of all Christians . . .

The patriarch of Constantinople was declared to be second in the hierarchy after the Pope followed by the patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. The decree was signed by the emperor and all the senior Byzantine clergy with the exception of Mark of Ephesus who remained obdurate and one other bishop who had quietly departed to avoid doing so.²⁷

On 6 July 1439 a public holiday was declared and all the delegates, Latin and Greek, along with the Pope, the emperor and a large part of the population of Florence, gathered in the cathedral. It was a magnificent spectacle:

The pope was placed on the side where the Gospel is read, together with the cardinals and prelates of the Roman Church, and on the other side, the emperor of Constantinople with all the Greek bishops and archbishops. The pope wore full pontifical vestments; all the cardinals wore their copes; the cardinal bishops, mitres of white damask; and all the bishops, Latin and Greek alike, copes.

After a solemn Mass, the decree of Union was publicly read out in Latin by Cardinal Cesarini and in Greek by archbishop Bessarion:

Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice. For, the wall that divided the Western and the Eastern Church has been removed, peace and harmony have returned, since the corner-stone, Christ, who made both one, has joined both sides with a very strong bond of love and peace, uniting and holding them together in a covenant of everlasting unity. After a long haze of grief and a dark and unlovely gloom of long-enduring strife, the radiance of hoped-for union has illuminated all.

Orders were given by the Pope for church bells to be rung throughout Christendom to celebrate the good news.²⁸

The council did not end on 6 July. It continued for several more years, discussing other issues such as the relations between a general council and the Pope, whose authority was still being challenged by the Council of Basel. For John VIII and the Byzantines, however, their business in Florence was done. They lingered for a few weeks and then set out for Venice towards the end of August. The long journey back took some months and it was not until February 1440 that John VIII, his brother Demetrius and the rest of the Byzantine delegation finally reached Constantinople.

There remained one very important piece of business arising from the council. As George Scholarios had told the Greek delegation at Florence:

You know very well, all of you, that fear of the infidel and the fact that our situation is desperate chiefly induced us to desire and to strive for union of the Church of Christ, though this would have been sought for by everyone for other and better reasons.²⁹

Even before the decree of Union had been signed, John VIII had despatched Isidore of Kiev to the Pope to ask what kind of military help the Byzantines could expect once union of the Churches had been achieved. Eugenius had promised a permanent guard of three hundred soldiers for the Byzantine capital, a fleet of twenty-six ships when the need arose, and if a land army were needed the Pope would urge the Christian princes of the west to provide it.³⁰

Simply shoring up the defences of Constantinople was not enough, however, for even as the Union of the Churches was proclaimed, ominous news arrived from the Balkans. Most Christian rulers there, like the Byzantine emperor, had treaties with the Ottoman sultan

and paid him tribute. And like the emperor, they were not averse to intriguing behind their overlord's back in the hope of escaping his domination. In the summer of 1439, Murad II had discovered that his Serbian vassals were considering handing over the fortress of Smederevo, which occupied a commanding strategic position on the River Danube, to the Hungarians. The sultan had marched north and had taken the fortress after a three-month siege. Such a show of force on the borders of Catholic Hungary could hardly have failed to raise anxieties in Rome.³¹

So it was that the hopes and prayers of John VIII and his pro-Latin advisers were answered and in the autumn of 1439, Eugenius IV began to take steps to raise land and sea forces for a crusade against the Ottomans. To encourage volunteers and donations, he issued the bull, *Postquam ad Apicem*, a universal appeal to all Christians to take the cross. In the tradition of crusading appeals of previous centuries, Eugenius gave a lurid account of Turkish atrocities:

Among other unprecedented cruelties that they commit during attacks on the lands of the Christians, when they return laden with plunder of people and animals, they lead captive many Christians of both sexes tied together with a rope and those who wearied by illness, age or other disability cannot keep up, they kill in the fields or even in the centres of Christian towns . . .

Such scenes had indeed been played out after the fall of Thessalonica in 1430, although there was doubtless some exaggeration too, as in the depiction of the alleged killing of innocent children who, ignorant of their imminent fate, smiled trustingly at their murderers. The bull would have been read out in translation in churches all over Europe, its content designed to outrage Christian opinion against the infidel. The Byzantines did their best to reinforce Eugenius's efforts. In the spring

of 1443, Theodore Karystinos was sent as ambassador to Venice, to the papal court in Florence, to the duchy of Burgundy and to Naples where he urged the king, Alfonso the Magnanimous (r.1416–1458), to ‘focus his noble attention on the pacification of Italy and the support of our excellent pope in this most holy campaign’.³²

Eugenius did not restrict himself to words. He organised the gathering and building of a fleet composed of ships contributed by the Venetians, the duke of Burgundy and the Pope himself. It was placed under the command of a cardinal, Francesco Condulmaro, and to pay for it, Eugenius ordered that a tax of 10 per cent be levied on the incomes of clergy throughout western Christendom. The attack was to be by land as well as sea, and a powerful army was to be provided by the young king of Poland and Hungary, Ladislas III (r.1434–1444).³³

Even before the fleet was ready to sail east, the land attack began. In late 1443 a powerful Christian force, which must have numbered some 25,000 men, crossed the Danube into Ottoman territory. The army was composed of Hungarians and Poles under King Ladislas and his leading general John Hunyadi, as well as a contingent of Serbs under their ruler George Brankovich, who was living in exile in Hungary. The Christian army seems to have caught the Ottomans unprepared and it marched south to Nish where it defeated an Ottoman force and then captured the town of Sofia. By the following January, the Christians were in Belgrade and had even succeeded in capturing Murad II’s brother-in-law, Mahmud Çelebi. Heartened by news of the Ottoman defeats, their enemies everywhere rose against them. In the Balkans, Christians revolted against their Turkish overlords, notably in Albania where George Castriotes Skanderbeg, a former protégé of the sultan, began a campaign of defiance that was to last for twenty-five years. In southern Asia Minor, Ibrahim Bey, the ever troublesome emir of Karaman, took advantage of the distraction to throw off his allegiance to Murad II and to attack Ottoman territories.

It seemed as if the tables had at last been turned on the all-conquering Murad and that the Christians would now roll back the hitherto seemingly unstoppable Turkish advance. After all, the disaster of Bayezid I's defeat in 1402 had only temporarily robbed the Ottomans of Asia Minor and their grip on the Balkans had not been challenged. Now they seemed to be in danger of losing everything and Ladislás looked poised to march victoriously into Adrianople. There was intense excitement in the Christian camp. The Italian humanist Cyriac of Ancona wrote enthusiastically to Cardinal Cesarini:

May the impious foe be everywhere put to flight, overpowered, and butchered. May we see not only Moesia, Greece, Macedonia, Epiros and Illyria freed and restored . . . through your agency, but may we also see, in good fortune and happiness, our upright and holy dominion and the practice of our bountiful religion spread notably beyond [those regions], throughout Asia and Libya and into Ethiopia, Africa and the Indies!

John VIII sent ambassadors to Buda to congratulate King Ladislás on his victories, delighted at the success that his pro-western policy had brought about.³⁴

There was, however, to be no quick victory. The momentum of Ladislás's army could not be maintained and the campaign ground to a halt early in 1444. The bitterly cold winter weather prevented the Christians from proceeding further and in February a truce was arranged to allow them to withdraw. The sultan had to pay a high price for peace, giving up the recently conquered fortress of Smederevo, but he had little choice as he needed a free hand to deal with the Karamanid ruler and could not fight simultaneously on two fronts.³⁵

News of Ladislás's truce was not welcomed in Rome, for the fleet of papal, Venetian and Burgundian galleys under the command of

Cardinal Condulmaro was now ready to sail with a view to linking up with the land army. It could hardly be disbanded and sent home now, and in July 1444 it arrived off the southern coast of the Morea. Cardinal Condulmaro made his way to Mistra where he announced to the despots Theodore and Constantine that the fleet was going to sail to the Black Sea to join up with the Hungarians for an all-out attack on the Ottoman Turks.³⁶ Meanwhile Cardinal Cesarini had been despatched by Pope Eugenius as his legate to Buda. He lost no time persuading King Ladislas to abandon the recently concluded truce with Murad. The opportunity to strike a decisive blow against the Ottomans was too good to miss, for the sultan was now absent with his army in Asia Minor. So preparations were made for a new offensive across the Danube.

Led by Ladislas and Cesarini, the Hungarian army moved south in September 1444, by which time Condulmaro's fleet had moved up to the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to prevent Murad from coming back to Europe with his army. News of the gathering of the Hungarian army reached Murad while he was at Bursa following his summer expedition against the Karamanid emirate. The campaign had been a great success. Konya had been captured and sacked, and Ibrahim Bey had been sent fleeing to the hills and forced to sue for peace. Now the sultan's triumphant mood was shattered by what he regarded as Ladislas's treachery and he grimly gave orders for his army to march on the Bosphorus. He sent orders ahead to Halil Pasha, his chief vizier, who had remained in Adrianople, to meet him where the strait was narrowest, opposite a castle called Anadolu Hisar which Bayezid had built on the Asian side. Halil arrived with a force of seven or eight thousand men and a plentiful supply of cannon with which he proceeded to open fire on the Burgundian and Hungarian ships that were patrolling the crossing. The crews of the Christian ships discharged their own cannon at Halil's positions but came off worse in the exchange of fire because

the Turks on land could take cover whereas they could not. Taken aback by the strength of the Ottoman assault, the commander of the fleet sent envoys to John VIII to ask for assistance but received only this reply:

I possess only this city of Constantinople which has few inhabitants. If I send them into battle, I know that they are not exactly powerful. I do not wish to put myself and my city in danger of total ruin, because once Constantinople is lost, the Turks will easily conquer the entire Greek empire. Do the best you can and when [the sultan] comes, I shall send two galleys to your assistance.

The next morning Murad and his troops appeared on the Asian side and they too set up their guns and opened fire on the Christian ships. The prevailing wind and current were so strong that it was difficult for the galleys to maintain their position, because their crews were constantly ducking to avoid the Turkish fire and so found it difficult to set the sails and man the oars. The two ships sent by the emperor arrived but by bad luck they suffered more damage from the cannon fire than any of the other vessels. Taking advantage of the confusion caused by their gunners, the Turks on the Asian side began to board small boats which had been helpfully supplied by the Genoese who had no interest in assisting the crusade. Over the next two days and nights, the entire Turkish army crossed to Europe, leaving the Burgundian chronicler who recorded the episode to conclude that 'it is impossible for galleys to guard the straits unless they control one of the two shores'.

From the Bosphorus, Murad marched north in search of Ladislás's army, indignant at the treachery of the Christians. As a Turkish envoy had told the commander of the Burgundian ships:

'The king of Hungary and the Hungarians have perjured and violated their oath. Murad Bey is going to do battle against them'.

Striking his hand on the hilt of his sword, he added: 'But by this sword, we shall be victorious'.

Murad caught up with the Christian army at the town of Varna on the Black Sea. The Turks outnumbered the Christians three to one, since George Brankovich and his Serbs had honoured the truce with Murad and so were not present. The Turks also had the advantage of position, hemming the crusaders in with the town of Varna and the sea to their backs. Even so Ladislav and his men showed extraordinary bravery, and the ensuing battle, fought on 10 November 1444, was a long, drawn-out affair, conducted in driving wind and rain. The Christians beat off wave after wave of attacks and even caused one wing of the Turkish army to retreat in disorder. Scenting victory, Ladislav then charged the main Ottoman army with just five hundred horsemen, attacking with such fury that at one point even Murad was contemplating flight. In the end, the Turkish numerical superiority came to prevail. Ladislav fell from his horse and was killed, the Turks hacking off his head and displaying it prominently on a lance. Dismayed by the sight, the Christian army faltered and scattered in disorder. Cardinal Cesarini fled with them but he was never seen again and was presumed to have been killed. Losses on both sides had been heavy with Murad losing around a third of his army, but it was the Ottomans who were left in possession of the field.

For John VIII and his courtiers, who were anxiously following these events from Constantinople, there was an agonising wait during which no news was received about the fate of the Hungarian army. Then the rumours started to arrive. Some said that Ladislav was victorious, others that he had been killed and that his head with its long golden hair was being displayed in a wooden box in Gallipoli. Desperate to know the truth, John despatched a galley to Mesembria. The people there told of the carnage on the field at Varna but insisted that there were many more

Turkish dead than Christian. It was only when some survivors of the battle reached Constantinople that the awful truth finally came out.³⁷

John VIII's policy of trading Union of the Churches for military help against the Ottomans had failed. The promised assistance had come but it had been comprehensively crushed. On the face of it, the crusade had been launched by the Pope and the Hungarians, and the Byzantine emperor had had nothing to do with it. Hoping to maintain that charade, John sent an embassy to Adrianople to congratulate Murad on his success at Varna. No one at the Turkish court was deceived and many there placed the blame for the eruption of Ladislás's army into the Balkans fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the 'accursed and irreligious' Byzantine emperor who had 'placed the pot of sedition on the fire'. He had severely tested the patience of the sultan and strained the treaty of 1424 to the limit. Surely, as in 1422, Murad's vengeance would be as swift as it would be relentless.³⁸



From Murad to Mehmed

MURAD'S REVENGE NEVER came. In the weeks following the disaster at Varna, it was widely rumoured that he was going to follow up his victory with an attack on Constantinople but the reports proved false. Instead he did something completely unexpected: he abdicated. No one knows for certain what prompted him to take this extraordinary decision. It could be that he was just tired. He was now forty years old and most of his adult life had been spent in relentless warfare. The mayhem and slaughter of the battlefield of Varna may have been the last straw. He is said to have gazed sadly on the piles of Christian dead and to have commented: 'Is it not amazing that they are all young men, not a single greybeard among them?'¹

Whatever Murad's reasons, there can be no doubt that he was in earnest. Letters were sent to the rulers of the Muslim world announcing his abdication and naming as his successor his twelve-year-old son, Mehmed. Coins ceased to be issued in the name of Murad and carried the name of the young sultan instead. Foreign powers were expected to deal with the new incumbent. In March 1446, when the Venetians wanted to renew their commercial treaty with the sultan, it was in Mehmed's name, rather than that of Murad, that the document was issued. The boy was not expected to rule alone. Halil Pasha remained in

post as chief vizier and it was no doubt he who now effectively governed the Ottoman empire. As for Murad, he departed from Adrianople and crossed to Asia Minor. There he installed himself in the quiet town of Manisa, near Smyrna, passing his days in peaceful contemplation and in penning wistful lines of poetry.² With Murad out of the way, Byzantium was left unmolested for some two years after the Varna disaster and it was another nine years before an attack was made on Constantinople. The Byzantines occupied themselves during this latest reprieve with what they had already been doing for decades: covertly testing the treaty of 1424 to the limit and pursuing the old debate on the Latins and the Ottoman Turks.

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Even if the Union of Florence had seemed at first to have been a success and to have brought in the large-scale western military assistance that the Byzantines had long sought, it became evident very early on that there was an unfortunate repercussion. When news of the terms of the Union reached Constantinople, voices were soon raised to condemn it as a betrayal of traditional Byzantine faith and doctrine. The obvious leader for these doubters was the archbishop of Ephesus, Mark Eugenikos, since he was the only ecclesiastic among the Byzantine delegation to Florence who had openly refused to sign the decree of Union, probably because he was unhappy about the acceptance of the 'heretical' Filioque. Once he returned from Italy, Eugenikos penned an encyclical letter 'to all Orthodox Christians everywhere', denouncing the Union and the Byzantine clergy who had signed up to it in the most outspoken terms. He urged true Orthodox Christians to:

Flee communion with the incommunicable and the commemoration of the incommemorable. Behold, I Mark the sinner, tell you

that whosoever commemorates the pope as an orthodox prelate has taken upon himself the whole of Latinism . . .³

Eugenikos's call to arms found plenty of vociferous supporters among the clergy. Many of the priests of Hagia Sophia who had not been at the council in Florence refused to celebrate the liturgy or have contact with any clergyman who had signed the decree. One of them, Theodore Agallianos, openly denounced the Union as 'evil and displeasing to God . . . the source of all our other misfortunes'. Monks, such as the uncompromising Neophytos of the Charsianites monastery, also backed Eugenikos. Many of them had been influenced by the mystical hesychast theology of Mount Athos and had little time for the intellectual, theological hair-splitting that had made the Florence compromise possible. Faced with such fervent criticism of their actions, even some of the clerical delegates to Florence began to have doubts. One archbishop who had signed the decree of Union publicly announced that he had changed his mind only a few months after he got back to Constantinople. These clerical anti-Unionists formed themselves into what they called the Synaxis, a kind of unofficial synod to coordinate and direct their opposition.⁴

It was only to be expected that clergy and monks would be excited by a theological issue like this, but there was a strong current of anti-Unionist feeling among the poorer people of Constantinople whose deep-seated anti-Latinism was based on memories of 1204 and who were impatient of subtle theological fixes. The charismatic Neophytos stirred up such passions with fiery sermons, threatening that those who supported the Union, or even had anything to do with clergy subscribing to it, were in danger of eternal damnation. He advised a pregnant woman that it was better to face the perils of childbirth without having received communion and absolution than to do so from the tainted hands of a Unionist priest.

There were opponents of the Union in educated and court circles too, such as John Eugenikos, the brother of the archbishop of Ephesus, and, by the middle of the 1440s, George Scholarios. Scholarios had manifestly not been at ease at the Council of Florence and had left early, but he did not immediately come out against the Union. He remained in favour at court and even wrote theological refutations of Mark Eugenikos. Eugenikos, however, had perceived that deep down Scholarios's heart was really with the anti-Unionists. When the archbishop fell seriously ill one summer, he summoned Scholarios to his bedside and made him promise to take up the baton as the defender of 'Orthodoxy' if Eugenikos should die. Shortly afterwards, Eugenikos did indeed pass away, leaving Scholarios as the intellectual leader of the anti-Unionist cause. The most prominent anti-Unionist of all was the emperor's own brother, the despot Demetrius, who like Scholarios had pointedly left the Council of Florence before the decree of Union was signed. The opposition of the despot was particularly dangerous because it fused the theological issue of the Union with the ongoing dynastic rivalry among the sons of Manuel II and the division in Byzantine society over accommodation with the Ottomans.⁵

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Shrill though the opponents of the Union of Florence were, it still had plenty of supporters and many of them were in positions of some power and importance. In a report to Pope Eugenius IV, Isidore of Kiev declared that the adherents of Union were 'the highest placed and, as it were, the foundation, namely the emperor and the patriarch, to say nothing of the largest part of the nobles and people'. The patriarch was now Metrophanes, former archbishop of Cyzicus and a signatory of the decree of Union. After the delegation returned from Italy in 1440, John VIII had appointed him patriarch to act as a leader of the Unionist clergy. Apart

from the emperor, non-clerical supporters of the Union included his brothers the despots Constantine, Theodore and Thomas, and members of their retinues like Theodore Karystinos. It had a following among those highly educated individuals who were sympathetic to the rational theology of Demetrius Kydones, such as the Aristotelian philosopher John Argyropoulos, and among those whose personal or financial interests were tied to the west, such as Franculios Servopoulos who was employed as notary by the Venetian bailey in Constantinople. It is unlikely that any of these men were as fanatical in their beliefs as Neophytos or Mark Eugenikos were in theirs. George Sphrantzes may well have been typical of them when he summed up his attitude to the Union:

For my part, my ancestral inheritance of our faith is sufficient. Never have I heard anyone from the other side say that our form of worship is incorrect. On the contrary, they maintain that it was ancient and proper. Similarly their [i.e. the Latins'] form of worship is not incorrect but proper.

In short, being pro-Union was often a matter of pragmatism and tolerance rather than entrenched belief.⁶

Perhaps the arch-pragmatist in the matter of Union was the most powerful man at the Byzantine court, the grand duke, Loukas Notaras. Curiously both sides denounced him as an enemy. Unionists credited him with the ultimate anti-Union catchphrase that 'it would be better to see the sultan's turban in Constantinople than the Latin mitre'. The fiercely anti-Union John Eugenikos, on the other hand, scolded Notaras for being too willing to associate himself with Unionists and sternly warned him that he risked falling into 'the cesspit of Latinism'.⁷ This apparent contradiction could have arisen because although Notaras's instincts may have been anti-Union, economic and political considerations probably inclined him not to take the rigid line of the brothers

Eugenikos. The grand duke had far too many important business dealings with the Catholic Genoese to take a strident anti-Latin attitude. A considerable part of his fortune was invested in the bank of St George in Genoa and one of his daughters, Euphrosyne, was married to the Genoese George Gattilusio. Notaras even became a Genoese citizen in June 1444, which enabled him to claim henceforth the protection of the republic for himself and his family. A few years later he took a practical step towards claiming that protection when, uneasy about the way things were going, he sent his youngest daughter Anna to Italy for safety in case the worst should happen and Constantinople should fall to the Turks. From a political point of view, as grand duke, a close adviser to the emperor and his relative by marriage, Notaras could hardly adopt a position that was completely at variance with official policy. It would seem that, whatever his personal feelings, Notaras fell in with the policy of promoting the Union and worked hard to persuade Scholarios and John Eugenikos to take a less entrenched attitude.⁸

Fanaticism versus pragmatism was not the only difference between the Unionist and anti-Unionist camps. Although they had the support of the emperor, the Unionists laboured under the disadvantage that some of their brightest stars were not in Constantinople to support their cause. Bessarion, who had been spokesman for the Greek Unionists in Florence, had returned to Italy in 1440 to take up residence as a cardinal at the papal curia. Another champion of the Unionist cause, Isidore of Kiev, had departed to his see after the council. When he arrived he had discovered an even more entrenched opposition to the Union than at Constantinople. The grand duke of Moscow, Vasilii II (r.1425–1462), was outraged when Isidore commemorated the name of the Pope in the liturgy and he had the hapless archbishop flung into jail. Isidore succeeded in escaping, or more probably was allowed to escape, but he did not return to Constantinople. Instead he eventually made his way back to Rome where he too was made a cardinal. This absence of promi-

ment Unionist clergy meant that John VIII was faced with some difficulty when the patriarch Metrophanes died in August 1443, for there was no obvious successor among the higher clergy. So John turned to his personal confessor, Gregory Melissenos, who held the relatively lowly office of *protosynkellos*, the adviser and deputy of the patriarch. Gregory had attended the Council of Florence, where his anti-Unionist opponents had complained that he used unfair tricks to undermine their arguments, and he was certainly not in the same intellectual league as Bessarion or Isidore.⁹

An awareness of the weaknesses of the Unionists might have been one reason why John VIII did little to enforce the Union of Florence in Constantinople. He made no attempt to have the decree of Union read out in Hagia Sophia as it had been in the cathedral at Florence or to have the Pope's name commemorated in the liturgy. There were certainly none of the floggings and imprisonments with which Michael VIII Palaiologos had tried to secure agreement for the similar Union of Lyon back in the 1270s. The worst that John VIII inflicted was the rather half-hearted exile of Mark Eugenikos to the island of Limnos between 1440 and 1442. He did make one attempt to bring the two sides together. In the late summer of 1445, representatives were invited to meet in Constantinople and debate the issues in the presence of the papal legate, Cardinal Condulmaro, who was still in the city with the fleet of ships that had so signally failed to prevent Murad from crossing the straits. Scholarios led the anti-Unionist assault with an attack on the Latin understanding of the procession of the Holy Ghost. Much wrangling followed but nothing was resolved and John was not willing to force the issue.¹⁰ It was not only an awareness of Unionist weakness that held the emperor back. Another reason for his inaction was that he was distracted. He had arrived back from Italy in February 1440 to discover that his beloved wife, Maria of Trebizond, had died three months before. John was devastated by his loss and was unable to give

his full attention to the debate on the Union. There was probably a third consideration too. The emperor was desperate to avoid a civil war.

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After his return from the Council of Florence, John VIII did his best to appease his brother Demetrius in the hope that he would not emerge as the political leader of the anti-Unionists. The town of Mesembria was handed over to him as his new appanage, but this sop did not resolve the issue. From his new powerbase, Demetrius cemented his alliance with elements in Byzantine society who were opposed to rapprochement with the west. His wife Zoe had died during his absence in Italy and in April 1441 Demetrius remarried. His bride was Theodora, a member of the powerful Asanes clan with whom Demetrius already had close connections. Theodora's brother, Matthew Asanes, had accompanied Demetrius to Hungary in 1423 after the Byzantine prince had first voiced his pro-Turkish sentiments and fled to Pera. The Asanes family seems to have been firmly in the pro-Ottoman and anti-Unionist camp. Theodora and her father Paul fled secretly from Constantinople to Mesembria for the wedding, so that it was clearly carried out without the approval of John VIII.¹¹

In the following months, tension mounted between Demetrius and his brothers. In October 1441, in a bid to defuse the situation, Constantine Palaiologos sent George Sphrantzes from the Morea to Constantinople. His mission was to gain John VIII's approval for an exchange of territory. Constantine was to hand over his lands in the Morea to Demetrius and instead become ruler of Selymbria and Mesembria. The required approval from John having been obtained, Sphrantzes travelled on to Mesembria to put the plan to Demetrius. On the face of it, the exchange would have been to Demetrius's advantage: a stretch of the wealthy and productive Morea in exchange for the

isolated and embattled town of Mesembria. Even so, he turned the offer down flat. He may well have seen in it an attempt by Constantine to position himself near Constantinople in readiness to take over if the ailing emperor were to die.

The inevitable showdown came in April 1442 when Demetrius marched on Constantinople with a troop of soldiers. Many of these soldiers were Turkish, probably supplied by Murad II who would have been only too happy to foment discord among the Palaiologoi and to support the anti-Unionist cause. The aim was probably to gain admission to Constantinople, perhaps with the help of someone on the inside as John VII had done in 1390. In alarm John VIII called his brother Constantine from the Morea to his aid, but Constantine only got as far as Limnos where he was blockaded by a Turkish fleet intent on preventing him from interfering with Demetrius's coup. As it happened, Constantine's help was not needed. Demetrius received no assistance from any supporters inside Constantinople and he could only wait outside the Land Walls with his Turkish allies, who proceeded to pillage the suburbs. In August, when it became clear that they were not going to be admitted, the Turks withdrew. Demetrius, left high and dry, ended up under house arrest in Constantinople.¹²

John had survived Demetrius's challenge but the episode must have made him feel vulnerable and isolated. He could hardly keep his brother in captivity for ever and at some point Demetrius had to be allowed to return to Mesembria. To ensure that there was no repeat of the events of 1442, John decided to see to it that at least one of his other, pro-Union brothers was closer to Constantinople to assist him and, were the childless John to die, to take the throne. In March 1443 he granted Constantine the city of Selymbria and Constantine sent Sphrantzes there post-haste to secure the place before John changed his mind or before Murad II or Demetrius could seize it. A year later, in a striking reversal of his initial eagerness to hold Selymbria, Constantine surrendered the

town to his brother Theodore, who handed over his lands in the Morea to Constantine in exchange. It becomes very difficult to discern exactly what the brothers were aiming to achieve as they jockeyed and manoeuvred in the limited space available to them. As the emperor's eldest brother, Theodore was in theory the heir apparent and this may explain why it was he who ended up being installed in Selymbria, the closest appanage to the capital and so best placed to get there if the throne fell vacant.¹³ After all, no one could be sure that military confrontation with Demetrius might not break out again. The defeat of his attempt on Constantinople in 1442 defused his opposition for the time being, but the disaster at Varna two years later must have strengthened the case of those who were opposed to the Union of Florence, for there could hardly be a more obvious sign of divine displeasure.

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The years after the Council of Florence and the abdication of Murad II were not only occupied with the repercussions of the Union. As in other periods of Ottoman weakness the Byzantines sought to capitalise on the situation as best they could, but this time it was not the emperor who did so. While John VIII sank into lethargy in Constantinople, it was his brother Constantine who moved quickly when Murad was distracted by Ladislav's invasion across the Danube. He reconstructed the Hexamilion wall in the spring of 1444 and then made a bold attempt to extend his dominions beyond the Peloponnese, leading an army over the Isthmus of Corinth and into the territory of the lord of Athens, Nerio II del Acciaiuoli. Nerio was a vassal of the sultan but in the face of superior force and with no help likely to come from Adrianople he had no option but to capitulate. Constantine left him in possession of Athens, but the annual tribute that had formerly been paid to the sultan was now to be handed over to the despot.

The following year, taking advantage of Murad II's abdication, Constantine led his troops over the Isthmus once more and this time he passed beyond Athens and into Thessaly as far as the Pindus mountains. His troops reached and occupied the town of Vitriniza on the Adriatic coast, much to the dismay of the Venetians. They had been promised Vitriniza by the sultan and they instructed their governor of nearby Lepanto to complain to Constantine in the strongest possible terms. Meanwhile, Constantine Kantakouzenos, who governed the town of Vostitza on the despot's behalf, ferried a force of cavalry and infantry across the Gulf of Corinth to Thessaly and captured two towns there. These attacks were even bolder than that on Athens, for Thessaly was not a vassal lordship but under the direct rule of the sultan himself. Constantine was openly breaching the peace treaty of 1424 and it is unlikely that he had cleared his actions with his brother the emperor in Constantinople beforehand. Nevertheless, for the time being Constantine appeared to have got away with it, as he had with the occupation of Patras in 1429, for Murad was in retirement in Manisa and no immediate reaction came from Adrianople.¹⁴

Unfortunately for Constantine, matters were about to change. All had not gone well in Adrianople under the rule of young Mehmed following Murad II's departure, and worrying messages had disturbed the old sultan in his haven of peace. In May 1446, Murad suddenly left Manisa with a contingent of 4,000 men and some months later he arrived in Adrianople and took control of the Ottoman government again. No one will ever know exactly what happened but it was later rumoured that it had been the chief vizier Halil who in alarm had begged Murad to return. One source suggests that the headstrong Mehmed had been planning an attack on Constantinople, something that Halil was, as ever, eager to avoid. Another version of events claims that the young sultan spent all his time hunting and drinking and that it was this unruly behaviour that had prompted Halil to act as he did.

Whatever the reason for Murad's return, Mehmed now found himself ignominiously stripped of power and despatched to Manisa. He never forgave Halil for his humiliation.¹⁵

With the reins of power firmly in his hands once more, Murad II made ready to counter the challenges to Ottoman authority that had arisen in his absence and the activities of the despot were among the most flagrant. Constantine must have been well aware that his incursions into Attica and Thessaly would be likely to provoke a response from the sultan sooner or later, whether it was Mehmed or Murad. One suspects, however, that he was not prepared for the speed and savagery of Murad's vengeance. Hardly was the sultan re-established in Adrianople in 1446 than he began to gather an army for the march on Greece. An ambassador was despatched to Constantine to deliver a curt demand that the towns which had been seized in Thessaly be returned at once. The despot refused to comply but Murad was already marching south. On 27 November he appeared with his forces before the Hexamilion. This time there was a garrison in place to defend the wall. The despot was there in person, along with his youngest brother Thomas, to lead the defence and he had ordered the digging of a trench in front of the wall to strengthen it still further. Nevertheless, Constantine was not so confident in his wall that he omitted to make one last attempt at reconciliation. An envoy was sent to Murad to propose peace but the sultan was in no mood to listen. The envoy was thrown into prison and Constantine was sent a peremptory demand to demolish the Hexamilion or face the consequences.

Murad had equipped his army well for the attack. It had a plentiful supply of cannon, as well as other kinds of siege engine which could be positioned along the whole length of the wall. After several days' bombardment, the Hexamilion was overrun by Murad's troops on 10 December. There were dark rumours of treachery but such an explanation is hardly necessary to account for why the wall once more failed

to stem the tide. Murad's army was just too big and too well equipped. Once enough breaches had been made in the wall, there were simply not enough defenders to plug them.¹⁶

With the Isthmus defences passed, the Morea was at Murad's mercy. He divided his army into two and sent his general Turahan south towards Mistra. The sultan himself led the rest of the force along the coast of the Gulf of Corinth towards Patras. Neither Mistra nor Patras were captured but the countryside was systematically burned and pillaged and large numbers of its inhabitants, perhaps in the tens of thousands, were rounded up to be sold into slavery. The Italian traveller Cyriac of Ancona later saw some of them at Gallipoli where they were waiting to be transported across to Asia Minor. Yet for all its savagery, this was a punitive raid, not a war of conquest. With the job done, Murad and Turahan withdrew, but not before the despots Constantine and Thomas had made their peace, agreeing to pay an annual tribute to the sultan and thus accepting vassal status. Their plucky but unwise bid for territorial expansion beyond the Isthmus was over.¹⁷

Given the completeness of Murad's victory, these terms were not harsh. Whether Murad would, in fact, have liked to have brought the Morea under his direct rule is impossible to ascertain but he probably was not in a position to do so at this juncture anyway. Constantine was not the only one who had taken advantage of the distraction of the crusade of Varna and Murad's premature retirement to mount a challenge to Ottoman hegemony. Since November 1443, Skanderbeg had been in revolt in Albania and in 1448 he joined the regent of Hungary, John Hunyadi, in an anti-Ottoman coalition. The alliance was crushed by Murad at the second battle of Kosovo in October 1448, but the threat had been great enough to ensure that Murad left Constantinople and the Morea alone for the time being. Even after his victory at Kosovo, Murad II chose not to threaten Constantinople and the Morea anymore. If truth be told, he relapsed back into semi-retirement

whenever he possibly could. This time he chose to do so at Adrianople rather than at Manisa. He built himself a residence on a verdant island on the River Tunca at the edge of his capital and there passed his days in pleasant conversation with poets and mystics, wishing for nothing more than to be left in peace.¹⁸

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While Murad was occupied elsewhere, the House of Palaiologos was experiencing another dynastic crisis. The five surviving sons of Manuel II were in an uneasy truce, with Demetrius still out in the cold and sulking in Mesembria. They were all well aware that the question of who was to succeed the ailing John VIII was now becoming urgent. As John had had no children by any of his three marriages, the heir apparent was the next eldest brother, Theodore, who now lived close by Constantinople in Selymbria. Then in June 1448, Theodore abruptly died. Now in theory, the next in line of succession was Constantine, as he was older than either Demetrius or Thomas. Everyone knew, however, that when the moment came the throne would go to whoever reached Constantinople first and seized it. Then only four months later, on 31 October, the fifty-six-year-old John VIII followed Theodore to the grave. He was buried the next day alongside his father and brothers in the Pantokrator monastery.¹⁹

None of John's brothers was in Constantinople at the time, but partisans of Demetrius, who must have included many anti-Unionists, began at once to agitate for him to succeed. The first on the scene, however, was Thomas. He had been on his way from the Morea to the capital by ship and heard the news of the emperor's death when he put in at Gallipoli. On arriving in Constantinople, Thomas declared himself in favour of Constantine and his opinion was shared by both the dowager empress Helena, the widow of Manuel II, and by a

substantial number of the prominent courtiers, including Loukas Notaras. Consequently, a decision was made to send two courtiers to the Peloponnese to acquaint the Despot Constantine with the situation and to invite him to return with them to Constantinople as emperor.

When the emissaries reached Mistra in January 1449, they took the precaution of staging a ceremony in the cathedral there at which Constantine was declared to be emperor. They could not wait until they got back to the capital, in case Demetrius had forestalled them. Constantine then duly left Mistra and arrived in Constantinople on board a Catalan ship. By now all three surviving brothers were in Constantinople and the opportunity had to be taken to reach some kind of agreement, confirmed by oaths that were sworn in the presence of their mother Helena. Demetrius was to receive a new appanage, taking over Mistra and Constantine's lands in the south and east of the Peloponnese. Thomas was to remain in possession of Patras, Glarentza and the north-west of the Peninsula. With that, Demetrius and Thomas departed for their respective capitals. Thanks to the prompt action of Thomas and the empress Helena, conflict had been averted.²⁰

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Constantine XI (r.1449–1453) was the last in the long line of Byzantine emperors and his reign marked the final years of the shadow empire before the decisive blow fell. At the time, however, the accession of the new emperor must have seemed like a bright, confident morning. There was genuine regret at the passing of John VIII, whom John Argyropoulos eulogised at his funeral as the 'glory and perfection to the Greeks', but everyone knew that in his last years John had been almost completely inactive, only rousing himself when acute danger threatened.²¹ Now that his energetic and able younger brother was at the helm, decisive action could be expected. Constantine's subjects were not disappointed. During

the first two years of his reign, he displayed incredible energy, sometimes in co-operation with his brothers, sometimes not, normalising relations with the sultan, defusing dynastic rivalry within his own family, attempting to breathe life into the Union of Florence to pave the way for renewed military help and seeking out new sources of revenue and allies.

The first priority was to ensure the friendship, or at least the indifference, of the sultan. The bruising experience of Murad's vengeance on the Hexamilion in 1446 had probably cured Constantine of the notion that he could confront the sultan in battle and win. Instead, Constantine now proceeded as his father and eldest brother had. Shortly after his arrival in Constantinople in 1449, the new emperor despatched ambassadors to Adrianople armed with gifts to mollify Murad. His mind fixed on higher things and distracted by the campaign against Skanderbeg in Albania, the sultan confirmed the treaty of 1424 and raised no obstacle to the accession of a man who had persistently defied him in the past. It was a significant diplomatic success, although any pleasure Constantine might have felt in it would probably have been spoiled had he known what was going on in Manisa. There the young Mehmed was biding his time, but having gained a taste for power during his brief reign in 1444–6, he was reluctant to give it up completely. He acted like an autonomous ruler, issuing coins in his own name and encouraging local pirates to attack Christian shipping in the Aegean. But Manisa was far from Constantinople.²²

Freed from fear of an Ottoman attack, Constantine was at liberty to consider the rivalries within his own family. The reduction of the factious brothers to three, all with their own clearly defined spheres of influence, might have lessened the tension but there remained the problem of the succession. The six sons of Manuel II had produced very few heirs to date. Constantine had been married twice and widowed twice before he became emperor and neither marriage had been blessed with children. Theodore, Demetrius and Thomas had all produced one

daughter each, all of whom had rather confusingly been given the same name, Helena, presumably after the dowager empress. Two of them had been married off to neighbouring rulers, Theodore's Helena to the king of Cyprus and Thomas's to the future despot Lazar of Serbia in 1446. Demetrius's Helena, the product of his recent marriage to Theodora Asanes, was only six in 1448. There was no male heir until January 1453 when Thomas's son Andreas would be born. That meant that in the event of Constantine's death, his brother Demetrius would have been next in line of succession, something that the Unionist camp was anxious to avoid. Urgent efforts now began to seek out a third bride for Constantine, with envoys being sent to the king of Aragon, the king of Georgia, the emperor of Trebizond and the despot of Serbia to consider their daughters as possible candidates. These negotiations were ultimately overtaken by events and led to nothing, but they were part of Constantine XI's attempt to confront the problems of his empire.²³

Constantine's diplomacy was also sending out feelers towards the west. Ever the optimist, he was hoping to stimulate another western attack on the Ottomans that might be more successful than the crusade of Varna, for he had experienced at first hand the damage that the initial success of that campaign had done to the Ottomans. There was, however, a serious impediment to appealing to the sympathy of the west and that was the continuing opposition to the Union of Florence in Constantinople. It had, if anything, been exacerbated by the death of John VIII, with many anti-Unionists openly canvassing for Demetrius rather than Constantine to become emperor.

Both camps underwent a crisis of leadership in the first two years of Constantine's reign. George Scholarios decided that when John VIII had died 'all my fortunes died too'. Under John's lukewarm enforcement of the Union, Scholarios had still been tolerated at court and continued to function in his post as a judge until 1447. Now he felt that there was no place for him and in November 1449 he publicly

announced that he intended to become a monk. Early the following year he entered the Pantokrator monastery and adopted the new monastic name of Gennadios. That did not mean that he had retired from the controversy. On the contrary, from his cell he continued to act as the leader of the anti-Unionists and to write tracts attacking the Union.²⁴ By contrast, the cause of the Union suffered a severe setback when it lost its leader in the late summer of 1450. The patriarch Gregory Melissenos, who had been brought in to combat the agitation of Mark Eugenikos and his followers, suddenly absconded. Wary perhaps of the endless opposition and controversy, he travelled first to the Venetian colony of Coron and from there to Rome, where he joined Bessarion and Isidore and settled down to life on a papal pension.²⁵ Since Melissenos had not officially resigned, no replacement was appointed for the time being, so that the Unionists now had no senior ecclesiastic to act as their figurehead.

Undaunted, the emperor decided to try anyway to raise support in the west. In April 1451 he sent Andronicus Vryennios Leontaris on a diplomatic mission to Rome. Part of Leontaris's brief was to acquaint the pope with the latest developments in the quarrel over the Union of Florence and the difficulties that the emperor was experiencing in dealing with the Synaxis, reassuring him that the rulers of Byzantium were still committed to the compromise made at Florence and urging him to encourage military assistance against the Ottomans.²⁶

Plaintive appeals were by no means Constantine's only resource. His diplomacy towards the west was a very active and varied one in which he played his limited hand to the full. For example, along with his two brothers, he sought to increase the scanty revenues by opening up the ports of Constantinople and the Byzantine Morea to merchants from western powers who had seldom visited in the past. In the summer of 1451, Constantine made a commercial treaty with the prosperous city state of Ragusa. Ragusan merchants were given permission to build a

residence in Constantinople and to have a consul based there to look after their interests. Most importantly, Ragusan merchants would pay a 2 per cent duty on all the goods they imported to and exported from the city, providing a welcome income for the Byzantine treasury. Shortly afterwards, the Despot Thomas granted similar concessions to Ragusan merchants operating in his territories.

Unfortunately, the brothers found it difficult to co-operate in this endeavour, as in so many other matters. In the month after Thomas had made his treaty with Ragusa, Demetrius went one further and granted Ragusan merchants complete immunity from customs duties in the ports under his control. In the previous year Demetrius had negotiated a similar treaty with Florence, allowing Florentine merchants to take goods in and out of his ports on payment of only moderate taxes. Perhaps he was trying to undercut his brother and to attract merchants to his ports rather than to Thomas's.²⁷

Dealing with relative newcomers such as the Florentines and Ragusans was easy. They were happy to agree to pay a small customs duty in order to get a foothold in the trade with the Morea and Constantinople. It was much more difficult when it came to the Venetians, who had long been used to paying next to nothing in customs duties. Constantine decided that the Byzantine treasury needed to benefit more from Venetian commerce in the Byzantine empire and during the summer of 1450 he imposed a range of new taxes on goods coming into Constantinople in Venetian ships. The government of Venice at once sent an envoy to Constantinople with instructions to protest in the strongest terms. The ambassador was ordered to remind the emperor that he was still heavily in debt to the Republic and to threaten that if the imposts were not lifted, the Venetians would enter into talks with Sultan Murad with a view to moving their operations to the port of Herakleia on the Black Sea coast of Asia Minor. Constantine stood firm and insisted that he had no

intention of withdrawing the taxes he had introduced, which he claimed in no way breached existing Byzantine treaties with Venice.²⁸

Again, imperial policy towards Venice was not uniform for in the Morea, Demetrius and Thomas showed considerably less diplomatic finesse. Their officials became so zealous in relieving merchants of Modon and Coron of their money that the Venetian inhabitants of those towns applied to Venice for permission to recoup their losses by taking the property of Byzantines living there. The despots also had a disturbing habit of seizing lands that were considered to be Venetian territory, prompting the Venetian government to lodge a formal protest with the emperor. Constantine promised action but does not seem to have done much. How these disputes would have been resolved in the long term is anyone's guess, for like Constantine's marriage negotiations they were cut short by the fall of Constantinople.²⁹

As well as trying to reap some fiscal benefit from the commerce of Constantinople and the Morea, Constantine and his brothers were constantly trying to exploit changes in the balance of power that might work to their advantage. One such change had occurred in June 1442 when Alfonso the Magnanimous, king of Aragon, had succeeded in capturing Naples and so finally vindicated his claim to the kingdom of Naples. By this coup, Alfonso became one of the most powerful rulers in the Mediterranean, controlling not only the kingdoms of Aragon, Valencia and Naples, but also the islands of Majorca, Sardinia, Corsica and Sicily. He had at his disposal the kind of power that would make him a very valuable ally if Murad decided to renew the offensive against Constantinople or the Morea. The Byzantines were not slow to make contact with Alfonso. Only a year after the capture of Naples, Theodore Karystinos had been despatched in an attempt to persuade the Aragonese ruler to join the crusade against Murad II. Around the same time arrangements were made for a Catalan consul to reside in Constantinople to oversee the interests of

merchants from Alfonso's lands. Soon after his accession in 1449, Constantine XI also made a series of approaches to Alfonso, proposing a marriage alliance between Demetrius's daughter and Alfonso's nephew that would lead to a military alliance against Murad.³⁰

Alfonso was, however, a dangerous man to deal with. He may have been a Christian but he was far more restless and ambitious than the world-weary Murad. He considered himself to have inherited a Catalan claim to the north-western Peloponnese and in November 1444 wrote to Constantine and Thomas Palaiologos to remind them of that, and to demand the surrender of Glarentza and Patras. Indeed in 1430 a Catalan force, which may or may not have been under Alfonso's control, had seized the port of Glarentza. Constantine had been compelled to pay over a large sum of money to persuade them to withdraw and had to demolish the town's fortifications to make sure that the same thing could not happen again. Any help that Alfonso supplied against the Turks, therefore, was likely to be at the price of most remaining Byzantine territory.³¹

Demetrius seems to have recognised the real situation more quickly than Constantine and that opened up another divergence between them. In February 1451, Demetrius made a secret treaty of his own with Alfonso. Some of its clauses were routine, such as the exemption granted to Catalan merchants from paying customs duties in the despot's territories. Rather more controversially, the treaty included a scheme for the expulsion of the Turks from Europe. Alfonso was to cross from Italy with an army and join forces with Demetrius. With the Ottomans routed, either Alfonso was to become emperor in Constantinople or he was to install Demetrius in that position, in which case Demetrius was to reign as his vassal. What was to happen to Constantine in the unlikely event of this hare-brained scheme succeeding was not divulged in the treaty, but presumably he would have to be removed as emperor. It is clear from this move that Demetrius's pro-Turkish and anti-Union stances, like those of John VII

before him, were subject to some flexibility. He was happy to talk to a Catholic ruler who would help him to achieve his ambitions.³²

All these diplomatic manoeuvres and marriage negotiations were not the actions of men who believed that the end was nigh. If they had, Constantine XI and his brothers might have been more circumspect in their relations with the Venetians, whose military assistance they would need in the very near future. It is unlikely that anyone else at the time thought that the sands were running out either, for the Byzantines had lived under the threat of disaster for as long as anyone could remember and things seemed no worse now than they had been for decades. So life went on as normal. In Constantinople, George Sphrantzes was blithely angling for promotion now that his long-standing patron was emperor, and he was grumbling that Loukas Notaras was deliberately blocking his path. At Mistra the aged George Gemistos was putting the final touches to a learned treatise on the philosophy of Aristotle and penning a laudatory speech about the Despot Demetrius. No one could have guessed how quickly events were to turn against them.³³

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The turn began at Adrianople early in 1451. One February evening Murad returned from his island retreat to his palace and after complaining that his body felt heavy and torpid, he retired to bed. Three days later he suffered some kind of seizure and died. As was customary, the ruler's demise was kept secret by Halil Pasha and the other viziers until word could be sent to Mehmed at Manisa. Only when news reached Halil that Mehmed was safely across the straits at Gallipoli did he authorise the announcement of the old sultan's death. As Mehmed approached Adrianople a large crowd was waiting for him, but there were no cheers of welcome. The custom was that the old ruler should be mourned first and so Mehmed was greeted

with loud wails and mournful cries, with which he and his retinue joined in before the whole assembly turned and walked in silence back to the city.

George Sphrantzes was in Trebizond when he heard the news, the latest stop in his odyssey to find a bride for Emperor Constantine. The ruler of Trebizond, Emperor John IV Komnenos (r.1429–1458), summoned Sphrantzes into his presence and announced jovially: ‘Come, Mr Ambassador, I have good news for you and you must congratulate me. . . .’ He related the sultan’s death and said that Murad’s son was now in power. Sphrantzes’s reaction was not the one that Komnenos had anticipated:

Overcome by grief, as if I had been told of the death of those dearest to me, I stood speechless. Finally, with considerable loss of spirit, I said: ‘Lord, this news brings me no joy. On the contrary, it is a cause for grief. . . . The late sultan was an old man, had given up the conquest of our city, and had no desire of attempting anything like it again; he only wished for friendship and peace. This man who has just become sultan, is young and an enemy of the Christians since childhood. . . . Indeed God would have granted a joyous occasion if this man, Murad’s son, had died instead.’

It was not the restless youth that had gone but the grizzled reluctant warrior. As Mehmed took over in Adrianople, his father’s corpse was borne off in state accompanied by one of his viziers. It was taken to Bursa, where Murad was interred in a tomb that he had commissioned and whose roof, according to his specific wishes, was open to the sky. This he had requested so that ‘the mercy of God might come unto him by the shining of the Sun and the Moon and the falling of the rain and dew of Heaven upon his grave’.³⁴



Nemesis

THE CHARACTER AND personality of the nineteen-year-old who arrived in Adrianople from Manisa in February 1451 will always be rather shadowy. Most surviving images of Mehmed II (1451–1481) show him in the last year of his life when he was a gouty and paranoid tyrant, and much of the detailed information that we have about him dates from his maturity and old age. There are only a few scattered clues as to what he was like before his accession. The Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul preserves a notebook that he used during his schooling in the 1440s. Its 180 pages are covered in meaningless Persian words, Greek and Arabic letters and not unskilful doodles, the work perhaps of a lonely, self-absorbed child. There are the coins that he issued from Manisa following the return of Murad to Adrianople in 1446. Unusually for Muslim coins of the period they carry pictures of animals, a basilisk and a lion, which might be an indication of Mehmed's willingness to flout convention when it suited him.¹

Mehmed's reputation has been further obscured by the efforts of hostile later contemporaries, notably the detailed but unflattering picture of him given in the pages of the Greek Unionist chronicler, Doukas. From the outset, Doukas presented Mehmed in the most lurid light possible and having described the death of Murad II, of whom he

thought very highly, turned to enumerating 'what this bloodthirsty beast Mehmed corrupted and consumed and utterly destroyed during his lifetime'. One of the new sultan's first actions was to seek out any other sons that his father may have sired from his harem. Only one was discovered, an eight-month-old infant whose mother was one of Murad's wives rather than a concubine, as Mehmed's had been. Mehmed wasted no time and sent an official called Ali into the women's quarters of the palace in Adrianople to strangle the child in its cradle. When the deed was done, Doukas claims, Mehmed had Ali murdered as well for good measure and then had the child's mother married off to one of his slaves. Doukas used the incident to set the scene for Mehmed as the ruthless tyrant, but although the murder probably did take place, and savage though it was, it was by no means unprecedented. Mehmed's father had ordered the strangulation of one of his brothers, who cannot have been more than a child at the time of Murad's accession in 1421. Mehmed was not so different from his predecessors. It was just that Doukas portrayed all his actions in the worst possible light to cast him as God's instrument for punishing the Byzantines for their failure to honour the Union of Florence, as Nebuchadnezzar was to the Jews.

However, not all aspects of Doukas's portrait of Mehmed can be dismissed as a manipulation of the record for the purpose of his specific agenda. Employed as a secretary by the Genoese rulers of the island of Lesbos, Doukas frequently visited the Ottoman court as their envoy. He spoke Turkish well and could chat to the soldiers and officials who thronged the palace at Adrianople. Indeed he recounts a conversation that he had with some Turkish soldiers after the fall of Constantinople. Some of the details about Mehmed may well have been palace gossip that he picked up on his travels, no doubt exaggerated but some of it reflecting what people had seen and observed.²

One aspect of Doukas's portrait that has the ring of truth is Mehmed's insecure and secretive nature. The chronicler calls him a

‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’ but a Venetian, Nicolò Sagundino, who saw him in 1453, put it more kindly, describing the sultan as having ‘a melancholy nature’. In this, Mehmed was completely different from the genial Murad who could swap jokes with his soldiers and earn their love and respect. Mehmed did not crave affection as do weaker personalities. He was self-sufficient and felt no need to share his plans with anyone, qualities that would have been of great value in the dangerous world of the Ottoman court. There is an anecdote that if anyone asked him about his plans, he would reply, ‘If a hair of my beard knew, I would pluck it out’. Mehmed was certainly adept at concealing his feelings. On his accession he retained the services of his father’s chief vizier Halil, even though he had not forgiven him for ending his first taste of power in 1446. The mask slipped sometimes, however. It is said that Mehmed once saw a fox tied to a post and advised it not to worry as the creature had only to pay a bribe to his vizier and it would be free.³

Another credible aspect of Mehmed’s character that emerges from the pages of Doukas is his obsessiveness. On one occasion, the sultan summoned Halil to him in the small hours of the morning. Fearing the worst, the elderly vizier embraced his wife and children and then presented himself before the sultan. Halil had not, however, been summoned to face the executioner but to hear his master’s complaints of insomnia: ‘See this pillow? I have passed the whole night dragging it about from one corner of the bedchamber to the other, reclining and rising without sleep.’ The cause of Mehmed’s sleeplessness was his constant agonising over the question of how Constantinople could be taken. The story is, of course, apocryphal, for no one could have known what went on in the sultan’s bedchamber. Even so, Mehmed’s complete immersion in whatever project he had decided on emerges from other, more believable accounts. Another Venetian who visited Mehmed’s court in 1453 noted that:

There is nothing which he studies with greater pleasure and eagerness than the geography of the world, and the art of warfare; he burns with the desire to rule, while being prudent in his investigation of what he undertakes.

The Venetian Sagundino wrote that ‘something always occupies him and he is always on the move, planning, thinking out and pondering how to carry out all designs he has decided upon, with admirable speed, incredible care and diligence’. It was this very obsessiveness and attention to detail that was to make Mehmed a superb general.⁴

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Given that aspect of Mehmed’s character, it is tempting to believe that he had decided to attack Constantinople from the moment he became sultan. It may have been something he pondered on during his days at Manisa before his accession, but even if he had, in the weeks after his arrival in Adrianople it would have looked unlikely that he would have the leisure to embark on such an enterprise for some years. After all, the victor of Varna and Kosovo and conqueror of Thessalonica had been replaced by an experienced youth who was known to lack his father’s popularity and whose last attempt to wield power had been a fiasco. It was inevitable that the enemies of the Ottomans would attempt to exploit the situation. Almost immediately news arrived that the emir of Karaman, Ibrahim Bey, had taken advantage of the succession to encroach onto Ottoman territories, and the summer of 1451 found Mehmed in Asia Minor on campaign against his Turkish rival.

In this situation, Mehmed had no choice but to ensure that he had as few active enemies as possible, for he would have been anxious to avoid a repeat of the two-front conflict of 1443–4. He promptly made treaties with his western, Christian neighbours, including the

Byzantines, the Venetians and the Genoese, to cover his back while he was away in the east. Doukas, unsurprisingly, asserts that Mehmed's peace treaties were simply a sham to gain time for his great enterprise of attacking Constantinople, but it may just as well have been that he had no ambitions in that direction at that stage.⁵

It was at the conclusion of the Asia Minor campaign that two incidents occurred which probably sealed Mehmed's resolve. When he returned to Bursa from the interior of Asia Minor, the sultan was met by an angry deputation of janissaries. They demanded a gift of money, presumably in return for their support of Mehmed's accession. The young sultan had no option but to comply and to order ten sacks of coins to be distributed among the mutineers. It was a stark reminder of just how weak his position was and may well have led him to realise that he needed military success if he was ever to shake off the memory of the humiliations of his first reign and enjoy the kind of unchallenged leadership that Murad II had.⁶

The second event that took place while Mehmed was in Bursa was the arrival of an embassy from Constantine XI. As ever, the Byzantines were looking for ways to exploit Ottoman dynastic rivalries and, like Ibrahim Bey, to take advantage of a moment of weakness. For some time they had had in their hands a member of Mehmed's family, Orhan, the grandson of Suleyman and a great-grandson of Bayezid. As the second cousin of the sultan, Orhan was a possible claimant to the Ottoman throne, and Murad II had apparently paid over to the Byzantine emperor the tax revenues of some towns in Thrace to reimburse him for keeping the Ottoman prince in comfortable seclusion in Constantinople. Now Constantine's envoys demanded that the sum be doubled, since Orhan had reached maturity. If the sultan failed to comply, they would release Orhan and let him stake his claim to the sultanate. This demand was met by outrage from Halil, to whom according to custom it was first communicated:

O stupid and foolish Romans, I know your cunning ways from long ago. Leave well alone! The deceased ruler was gentle and to all he was a sincere friend and a man of upright conscience. Our present ruler Mehmed, however, is not of the same disposition . . .

One can well imagine the chief vizier's frustration after having laboured for so many years for peace between the sultan and Constantinople. It can only be assumed that Constantine XI and his advisers had concluded that Mehmed was in such a weak position that he would have to bow to their demands as he had to those of the janissaries. After all, his father Murad had accepted the provocation of John VIII's decision to go to Ferrara. Certainly, when the envoys' message was conveyed to Mehmed, he showed no anger as Halil had done. Instead he merely told them with cold courtesy that he would deal with the matter when he returned to Adrianople.⁷

It was probably now, in Bursa in the summer of 1451, that Mehmed took the decision to attack Constantinople. The Byzantines had given him a pretext with their ill-judged demand, and if he succeeded he would have achieved a victory so spectacular that none would ever dare challenge him again. The campaign against the Karaman Turks had gone well and Ibrahim Bey had once more been forced to flee to the mountains and sue for peace. It would have been easy for Mehmed to finish them off, but the elimination of a minor Turkish emirate would not bring the prestige that Mehmed craved. He therefore made peace with Ibrahim and marched with his army back to Europe.

On reaching Adrianople in January 1452, Mehmed became consumed day and night with the project he had set himself. Throughout his waking hours he went about planning of his enterprise with painstaking thoroughness. He pondered endlessly over various strategies, pored over lists of reserve troops, tax revenues, supplies and weapons, and traced out the line of the Land Walls with pen and

paper.⁸ No detail was too small to escape his notice and it is likely that he paid careful attention to the sieges mounted by Bayezid in 1394–1402 and by Murad II in 1422, and the reasons why they had not succeeded. In both cases, the powerful land forces that had blockaded the city by land had not been matched by a similar size of naval force to cut it off by sea. So Mehmed began to build up a strong fleet of ships at his main naval base of Gallipoli. Said to number some 350 warships and many transport vessels, the fleet was placed under the command of Baltoglu, the governor of Gallipoli.⁹

When considering the lessons of past sieges, Mehmed must have been aware that Bayezid had possessed no gunpowder weapons whatsoever during his attempt on Constantinople and that those used in the 1422 siege had not had much impact on the Land Walls. According to one source of information, it was after carefully considering those walls that the sultan commissioned an enormous cannon to complement the ones he already had. For by this time the Ottomans knew the secret of founding a cannon large enough to have a significant impact on masonry without the weapon shattering on firing. The answer lay in the exact alloy to be used, a mixture of bronze and tin. The technology was probably obtained by Mehmed from a renegade Christian, a Hungarian called Urban in some accounts, while others give the credit to a German. Whichever it was, Mehmed had the acumen to see the need for the weapon and the organisation to have it ready in time for the attack.¹⁰

There was another lesson that Mehmed had learned from the failures of Bayezid and Murad. A way had to be found to prevent naval help reaching Constantinople from the Black Sea, where the Venetians and Genoese maintained colonies and trading posts. In March 1452 Turkish troops and some three thousand workmen arrived at the point on the European shore where the Bosphorus was at its narrowest. The spot chosen was opposite the castle known as Anadolu Hisar, where

Murad II and his army had crossed in 1444 to do battle at Varna with the Hungarians. Over the next few months Mehmed's artisans constructed a fortress consisting of three very large main towers linked by a curtain wall that was up to seven metres thick. With typical cunning, Mehmed entrusted each of his three viziers with the task of building one of the towers, forcing them to compete against each other and ensuring that the project was completed in record time after only five months. Known as Rumeli Hisar, the new fortress was garrisoned with a force of janissaries and cannon were mounted on the towers with a view to closing the passage to ships and supplies coming from the Black Sea. A few months later Mehmed was able to give a dramatic demonstration of the fortress's power. It was announced that all ships passing through the Bosphorus should henceforth lower their sails when they passed the fortress and pay a customs duty to its commander. Most complied but one Venetian ship, commanded by Antonio Rizzo, on its way from the Black Sea to Constantinople with a cargo of food-stuffs, attempted to sail past. One shot fired from the fortress struck the vessel, which rapidly took on water and sank. The survivors swam ashore, only to be seized and beheaded. The captain was impaled on a stake and left to die on a hill overlooking the strait, a visible warning to other mariners of the fate that awaited them if they failed to stop at Rumeli Hisar.¹¹

By March 1453 the preparations were complete. The Ottoman army began to move east out of Adrianople. An advance force under Karaja Bey was sent ahead to deal with the towns and fortresses that belonged to the emperor along the coasts of the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. His troops took several fortified towers by storm, massacred the garrisons and plundered the countryside before arriving before Mesembria, the town that had once been the appanage of the Despot Demetrius. In spite of the natural defences of their city, the inhabitants of Mesembria chose not to resist and surrendered to Karaja Bey at

once. There was stiffer resistance to the south. Although less well fortified, Selymbria refused to surrender. A blockade had to be mounted around its walls to ensure that the inhabitants sent no help to Constantinople. With these enclaves neutralised, the main Ottoman force began its advance from Adrianople. Contemporary estimates of the size of the Ottoman army varied from 160,000 to 200,000. Although these figures were exaggerated and a large proportion of the Turkish host would have been non-combatants, there can be no doubt that it was a very formidable force indeed. It was accompanied by the newly constructed cannon, which was so large that it allegedly needed a team of between 60 and 150 oxen to pull it along. In the early days of April, the army arrived in stages at the Land Walls and began to spread out and dig itself in along their entire length. Some days later the Ottoman fleet sailed up from Gallipoli, cruised past the Sea Walls and made for the small port of Diplokionion on the Bosphorus to the north of the Golden Horn. The net had closed.¹²

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The inhabitants of Constantinople had become aware of Mehmed's intentions as early as September 1451 when rumours had started to circulate that the sultan was planning to build a castle on the Bosphorus. They may not have been given credence at first, for previous sieges had been preceded by an obvious build-up of tension and on this occasion the emperor had recently confirmed his treaty with the sultan. Only when work began on Rumeli Hisar the following year could there no longer be any uncertainty, and the sultan's preparations were the subject of endless gossip and speculation on the streets of Constantinople. Some people were 'convinced that the city would be assaulted and captured by the barbarians. Others believed that just as Mehmed's father and grandfather had failed to take the city, so he too

would follow the same path.’ But there could be no doubt as to the gravity of the situation. A Genoese merchant living in Pera took care to make his will not, he said, because he was in ill health but because of the danger that now hung over the city.¹³

Constantine XI’s response to Mehmed’s early moves was to send ambassadors to Adrianople to request a halt to the building work on Rumeli Hisar which, they said, was taking place in Byzantine territory. Mehmed dismissed them curtly, pointing out that the emperor effectively had no territory outside the Land Walls. He also reminded them of the difficulty that his father Murad had experienced crossing the Bosphorus in 1444. He did not intend to be incommoded that way himself.¹⁴ It was a long time since the Byzantines had received such a direct rebuff from the sultan himself, and it must have brought home to the emperor and his advisers the gravity of the threat that had materialised from nowhere with terrifying speed. They had no alternative but to start seeking help from outside. To begin with, Constantine had considered following in the footsteps of his brother John and travelling to the west to appeal for aid in person. In the end, he sent ambassadors, first to Venice and then to Rome to give warning of the danger. The Pope, now Nicholas V (r.1447–1455), was not as sympathetic as the emperor had hoped. He was well aware of the opposition to the Union of Florence in Constantinople. He could hardly fail to be, given that the Unionist patriarch Gregory III Melissenos was living in Rome as a virtual refugee. Nicholas considered that the emperor had failed to implement the agreement properly and so his response to Constantine’s appeal was this:

If with your nobles and the people of Constantinople you embrace the decree of Union, you will have Us and our venerable brethren, the cardinals of the holy Roman Church, with the whole of the Western Church ever instant for your honour and state. But if you

with your people refuse to accept the decree of Union, you will force us to take such measures as are suited to your salvation and our honour.¹⁵

The Union would have to be proclaimed publically in Hagia Sophia before the Pope could authorise a crusade, something John VIII had failed to arrange. In October 1452, the Greek cardinal Isidore and the archbishop of Mytilene, Leonard of Chios, arrived in Constantinople to organise the ceremony. On hearing the news of their arrival, Gennadios nailed a declaration addressed to those who supported the Union to the door of his monastic cell:

Ah, benighted souls, not only have you lost everything, but you now infamously and perfidiously turn your backs on that which is most holy. Instead of finding solace in God during these iniquitous times, is it rather separation from God that you seek? . . . Now I bear witness before God that this Union of yours is evil . . .¹⁶

A few weeks later he issued a manifesto on the same theme, copies of which were circulated throughout the city. The pragmatic Loukas Notaras, who had some sympathy with Gennadios's views, nevertheless warned him:

You are labouring in vain, Father, because it has turned out that the commemoration of the pope is to be given and there is nothing to be done about it. Granted then that you can do nothing to stop it, if you choose to come, co-operate in our doing it.

As Notaras predicted, the event took place on 12 December in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in the presence of the emperor, the Senate and a large congregation. The decree of Union was read out, and the Pope and

the absent patriarch Gregory were commemorated and prayed for. Needless to say, Gennadios and the rest of the Synaxis were not there.¹⁷

As far as the emperor and Notaras were concerned, the Union had been implemented and they could now hope for help from the west. After all, Isidore had not come to Constantinople armed with spiritual counsel alone. He brought with him a force of fifty mercenaries, who at least added something to the city's defence, and supplies of money with which he paid for the repair of a section of the Land Walls. Wisely though, Constantine did not rely solely on the hope that western Christians would come to Constantinople's aid purely out of crusading zeal. Inducements were offered to Catholic rulers. The island of Limnos was offered to Alfonso of Aragon, and Selymbria and Mesembria to John Hunyadi, who was now ruling Hungary as regent. The most significant military assistance came not from these powerful rulers but from a Genoese soldier of fortune called Giovanni Giustiniani. He arrived in Constantinople in January 1453 with two ships and a force of several hundred men. One commentator believed that he had arrived 'because he realised the need in which Constantinople stood, and for the advantage of the Christian faith and for the honour of the world'. That did not mean that he would not expect a material reward. He too was promised Limnos. In the end, however, large-scale western help did not materialise and Constantinople was left with a woefully inadequate garrison with which to meet Mehmed's attack. Sphrantzes reckoned that there were only 4,973 defenders but he probably underestimated the numbers of Genoese and Venetians who took part. Archbishop Leonard of Chios counted some 9,000, which seems more realistic but still pitifully small. No wonder Sphrantzes commented bitterly that Constantinople received as much help from the Pope as it did from the sultan of Egypt.¹⁸

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With Constantinople now surrounded and under blockade, with little help forthcoming from outside and Mehmed's huge army visibly well equipped with weapons that could cause serious damage to the Land Walls, there must have been genuine fears that Constantinople would share the fate of Thessalonica. Yet at no time did Constantine XI consider negotiation or surrender. Soon after pitching camp outside the Land Walls, Mehmed sent messengers to offer peace terms as his father had at Thessalonica in 1430. The terms were the same. The inhabitants were invited to surrender the city in return for security of their lives and property under Ottoman rule. As in 1430, the terms were rejected. They were made again, shortly before Mehmed's final assault on the Land Walls, and again rejected. According to Doukas, Constantine's reply was: 'The right to surrender the City to you belongs neither to me nor to anyone who dwells therein. Rather than to have our lives spared, it is our common resolve willingly to die.'¹⁹

Stirring words indeed, but one wonders just how many of those inside Constantinople shared these sentiments. Mehmed's blockade soon began to bite and food supplies started to run short, so that by early May 'there was a growing lack of provisions, particularly of bread, wine and other things necessary to sustain life'. Inevitably, it was the poorer people of the city who were the first to suffer, for prices soared as profiteers hoarded their supplies to drive up their value. Constantine XI did his best to alleviate the problem, sending representatives to Naples to organise shipments of corn, anxious to avoid the mass defections that had been a marked feature of the 1394–1402 siege. There is no evidence for people letting themselves down from the walls and escaping to the Turks as they had then, but there were still signs of discontent. Many poorer Byzantines took to demanding to be paid before they would give their labour to repair the Land Walls, and some of them preferred to work on their own vineyards and vegetable plots rather than on shoring up the defences. Archbishop Leonard of Chios

upbraided them for their conduct, accusing them of putting the whole of Christendom in danger. The response was: 'How can I think of the army, when my family is in want?' It is likely that had the siege gone on longer, there would have been defections to the Ottoman camp.²⁰

It was not just the poor who were placed in a position where personal interest and public duty were difficult to reconcile. Wealthier Constantinopolitans may have had enough to eat but most of them drew their income in some way or another from Constantinople's trade, and with the establishment of Mehmed's blockade that was cut off at a stroke. The two worst possible outcomes were either a protracted siege, like that of Bayezid I, which would effectively strangle the city's commerce, or an Ottoman victory by force of arms which would mean that Constantinople would be subject to the kind of merciless sack that Thessalonica had suffered in 1430. From a purely commercial point of view, it would be preferable to find some way back to the situation as it had been before 1452, with the siege being broken off as it had been in 1402 and 1422. If that were not possible, there was also the course of action that had been considered by John VII back in the 1400s of surrendering the city to the sultan. There is no evidence that anyone among the Byzantine ruling classes openly advocated capitulation during April and May 1453, but that was probably because Mehmed's siege was so short there was little opportunity for them to do so. Some appear to have felt it prudent to hedge their bets. It was widely rumoured that the leading citizens were extremely reluctant to put their personal fortunes at the disposal of the emperor to help fund the defence of the city, even when he personally begged them to do so. They were supposed to have hidden their money instead, one individual allegedly having squirrelled away 70,000 florins in a jar. 'What traitors were among the Greeks', opined the self-righteous Leonard of Chios when he heard about it, 'what greedy betrayers of their country!'²¹

The archbishop was unfair in asserting that wealthy Byzantines were interested only in saving themselves and their fortunes. Alongside their understandable concern to preserve their assets was a readiness to make sacrifices for the defence of the city. The grand duke Loukas Notaras is a case in point. He had ensured that much of his wealth was safely deposited in the Bank of St George in Genoa where it was safe from both the Turks and from the Emperor Constantine. That did not mean, though, that he regarded himself as having no obligation towards his sovereign. As the crisis of 1451–2 unfolded and it became clear that money was needed to improve the defences of the city, it proved difficult for the emperor to raise a loan from Italian banks. His predecessors had defaulted too often in the past. A loan was forthcoming in the end because Notaras provided collateral on his own personal fortune. The fact was that wealthy individuals like Notaras faced a genuine dilemma reconciling patriotism with their own financial interest and perhaps unsurprisingly they often ended up compromising between them.²²

Nor were they the only ones to do so, for the same was true of other groups who drew commercial benefit from Constantinople's trade, such as the Genoese of Pera and their podestà, Angelo Lomellino. When Mehmed arrived with his army in April 1453, Lomellino saw no reason why Pera should allow itself to come under attack too. Envoys were accordingly sent to the sultan to pledge Pera's neutrality during the forthcoming siege. Indeed, it was rumoured that the Genoese went beyond neutrality, supplying Mehmed with vital intelligence about the intentions of the defenders and selling to the Turks vital war material, such as the oil needed to prevent their cannon from splitting. At the same time, the claims of common religion threatened by the onslaught of infidels could not be denied. In spite of the pact with Mehmed, Lomellino secretly sent troops from Pera to participate in the defence of the Land Walls, his own nephew among them. Even then the

ambivalence remained and commercial instincts came to the fore. There were claims that some of these Genoese troops used to cross over to the Turkish lines by night to trade.²³

For Nicolò Barbaro, a Venetian surgeon who left a first-hand account of the siege, the conduct of his city's traditional rival was rank treachery and he denounced the Genoese of Pera as 'enemies of the Christian faith'. How different was the behaviour of his fellow countrymen, he claimed. When Mehmed's intentions had become clear, the captains of the Venetian vessels in the Golden Horn had taken the decision to stay and participate in the defence of Constantinople 'first for the love of God and then for the honour of the Christian faith'. Barbaro could not hide, however, that the conduct of the Venetians was often very similar to that of wealthy Byzantines and the Genoese of Pera. Not everyone was happy to risk their lives and livelihood by staying and fighting. One captain, Piero Davanzo, secretly weighed anchor on the night of 26 February, stole out of the Golden Horn and got his ship, crew, passengers and cargo away to Crete. The crews of those ships that did remain were fiercely opposed to any attempt to unload their cargoes, in which many of them would have had a financial stake. When this was proposed on 8 May, the sailors drew their swords and threatened to resist violently, so that the captains had to back down. The cargoes remained on board the ships so that they would not have to be left behind in case the Venetians had to leave in a hurry, which in the event is exactly what they did. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the captains did not stay in Constantinople solely for the honour of the Christian faith. The emperor Constantine agreed to provide food for the crews as long as they remained in the Golden Horn and pay them the sum of 400 ducats a month.

The Venetian government, like that of Pera, did its best to remain at peace with the Ottomans while secretly helping Constantinople. When

a Byzantine ambassador arrived in Venice in November 1452 with a plea for help, he was told that although Venice was taking some naval measures to protect Constantinople the envoy should direct his request to the Pope who could unite the efforts of other Christian powers. In the spring of the following year, when the Venetian Senate finally decided to send a fleet to help Constantinople, they told Bartolomeo Marcello, the ambassador to Mehmed II who was to accompany it, that he should assure the sultan that the fleet was only being sent to protect Venetian interests and not to make war on the Ottomans. Marcello was also supposed to try to patch up some kind of peace treaty between the sultan and the Byzantine emperor. As it turned out, neither fleet nor ambassador reached Constantinople before the city had fallen.²⁴

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It was not only Christians who found themselves in the dilemma between supposed religious duty and personal interest. There was as wide a gap between the views of the Ottoman sultan and those of some of his subjects as there was between those of Constantine and many Byzantines. Once Mehmed had made the decision to attack Constantinople, he was quick to clothe the campaign in the garb of a *jihad* against the infidel, even though he had been cheerfully battering his fellow Muslim Karaman Turks just a few months before. It was intolerable, he claimed, that Constantinople, 'surrounded by the lands of Islam, should survive under a Christian ruler', and he could appeal to the special place that the city had in the Muslim imagination. Its fall to a Muslim army was foretold several times in the *Hadith*, a collection of sayings traditionally attributed to the prophet Mohammed: 'Verily you shall conquer Constantinople. What a wonderful leader will her leader be, and what a wonderful army will that army be!' There had

been several attempts in the past, long before the sieges of Bayezid and Murad II, to bring that prophecy to fruition. The Arabs had tried in 674–8 and 717–18 and thousands of them had perished in the attempt, including Ayup, the standard bearer of the prophet whose tomb was still to be seen close to the Land Walls. To follow in their footsteps could be presented as a holy duty, incumbent on all Muslims.²⁵

For many Turks, however, who had lived peacefully alongside the Byzantines for years, the call to arms was a disaster. As Karaja Bey ravaged the areas outside the Land Walls, Constantine XI took revenge by sending out ships to attack the defenceless Turkish villages on the shores of the Sea of Marmara. Many Turks were killed and others taken off to Constantinople to be sold as slaves. When the city gates were closed in preparation for the siege, there were numbers of Turks who found themselves shut in and were arrested on the orders of the emperor. Most would have been merchants but there was also a group of eunuchs who were servants in Mehmed's palace. Here the story had a happier ending, for after three days Constantine allowed the merchants and eunuchs to depart unharmed. There were even some Turks who did not want to go, notably Prince Orhan and his loyal band of followers. They preferred to fight alongside the 'infidels' rather than take their chances with their co-religionists and they were given a section of the Sea Walls to guard.²⁶

Even inside Mehmed's army, large and formidable though it was, there were few wild-eyed fanatics seeking conquest or martyrdom. A proportion of his troops were Christians, sent along by their rulers in fulfilment of the terms of their vassalage, and even among the Muslims there were not many to whom the rhetoric of holy war meant much. Mehmed's spiritual adviser, Sheikh Akshemsettin, admitted in a letter to the sultan that few in the army were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the love of God and advised him to motivate them instead with

promises of booty. The most elevated of the reluctant jihadists was the chief vizier, Halil Pasha. Given his rank, he could hardly avoid participating. He had overseen the construction of part of Rumeli Hisar and had command of an important section of the besieging army opposite the Land Walls. As far as his personal interests were concerned, however, he had nothing to gain from an outright Ottoman victory and a great deal to lose, for his financial interests in the city and the bribes that he received from the Byzantine emperor would all disappear. So while playing his part in the siege, he continued to oppose the enterprise and to encourage the sultan to given it up. He remained in contact with the Byzantine emperor, keeping him informed of the sultan's latest plans. Rumour had that he went still further and used his influence to prevent Mehmed from forging as many new cannon as he wished.²⁷

One could take the line that those who tried to keep a foot in both camps, like Halil and Lomellino, were traitors, but that only applies if one subscribes to the view that medieval Christians and Muslims lived completely separate and mutually hostile lives. In the century prior to Mehmed's siege, whatever their religious differences, the affairs of Byzantines, Latins and Turks had become completely intertwined, especially in the commercial life of Constantinople. It was the ruthless ambition of Mehmed that had ripped the intricate web of co-existence asunder by cloaking itself with the justification of holy war. That was what had forced Christians and Muslims alike to choose between personal interest and perceived duty.

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Swiftly though Mehmed had moved to gather his forces and march on Constantinople, the Byzantines had had some warning and they had done their best to put their defences in readiness. Arms were stock-

piled, the Land Walls were repaired and the moats were cleared. The Venetians constructed a new moat around the curved northern section of the Land Walls at Blachernae. The heavy iron chain was stretched across the mouth of the Golden Horn, barring the Ottoman fleet from entering the harbour. The available troops were positioned over the long span of the Land and Sea Walls to maximum effect. The most vulnerable stretch was that between the Gate of Adrianople and the Gate of St Romanos, the so-called Mesoteichion, or 'middle of the wall'. This was where the Land Walls dipped down into the valley of the River Lykos so that artillery placed on the higher ground beyond the moat could fire down them with greater velocity and effect. The emperor and Giustiniani were well aware that Mehmed was likely to attack this section with his cannon and therefore positioned themselves there with their best men. Also at risk was the section that surrounded the emperor's palace of Blachernae, for it bulged out from the line of the Land Walls like a salient and so would be a natural target for undermining. This stretch was defended by the Venetian bailey, Girolamo Minotto, and the crews of five of the Venetian merchant ships in the Golden Horn. Numbering about a thousand men, they disembarked and marched proudly to the Land Walls, flying their banners of St Mark. Other less exposed sections of the defences, such as the Sea Walls along the Golden Horn, could be more lightly garrisoned.²⁸

So when Mehmed's army and fleet arrived in early April, the defenders were ready and waiting. The sultan lost no time in setting up his cannon facing the Land Walls. Three he placed outside the Pegae Gate, three at Blachernae and two at the Gate of Adrianople. Four were reserved for the Gate of St Romanos, to maximise the advantage given by the Mesoteichion, and these included the largest gun which could fire balls that weighed over 650 kilograms (1,433 pounds). On 12 April the guns opened first, the blast being audible in Constantinople, far from the Land Walls.

There was a fearful roar first, and a shaking of the earth beneath and for a long way off, and a noise such as was never heard before. Then, with an astounding thunder and a frightful crashing and a flame that lit up all the surroundings and then left them black, the rod, forced out from within by a dry hot blast of air, violently set in motion the stone as it came out.²⁹

Within days, the guns had proved that they were a far cry from the ineffective weapons used by Murad II's army in the siege of 1422. As the stones crashed into the Land Walls, sections began to crumble and the defenders behind the walls found themselves looking into the faces of their enemies beyond the moat. Then terrifyingly, on 21 April, after a day-long bombardment near the Gate of St Romanos, an entire tower and several yards of wall on either side were brought crashing down.³⁰

Spectacular though such demolitions were, the damage done by the cannon did not deliver victory into Mehmed's hands straight away, for they were by no means easy weapons to use. The larger ones were so difficult to load that they could only be fired seven times a day and after firing they had to be carefully cooled with oil to ensure that they did not split. Even with this precaution they were still dangerous and unpredictable, and one of the larger cannon did burst, doubtless with catastrophic results for those standing nearby. These drawbacks meant that the damage done to the Land Walls was slow, allowing Giovanni Giustiniani to take effective counter-measures. He had the gaps filled with lines of barrels covered in mounds of earth. The new defences can hardly have looked as impressive as the towers of the Land Walls but they were in fact far better at deflecting cannon balls, which merely sank into the soft earth without causing any damage. When the Turks mounted attacks on the wall in an attempt to exploit the gaps, they found themselves facing as formidable a barrier as ever and were driven

back with heavy casualties. The defenders had small cannon of their own mounted on the walls, which proved extremely effective. Some fired a ball only the size of a walnut but such was its velocity, and so tightly packed together were the Turkish troops, that the projectile would pass straight through the armour and body of one man and then through two others behind him, killing all three.³¹

With the cannon providing no quick victory, Mehmed might have hoped for action from his fleet. Its commander, Baltoglu, however, fought shy of engaging with the Venetian vessels that were stationed behind the chain across the Golden Horn, knowing that their inferior numbers were more than compensated for by superior seamanship. Then on 20 April five Genoese ships were sighted sailing north across the Sea of Marmara towards Constantinople to run the blockade with supplies of food from the island of Chios. It was too good an opportunity to miss and almost the entire Ottoman fleet set out from Diplokionion to intercept them. The two fleets met just as the Genoese vessels were about to round the tip of Constantinople's peninsula and enter the Golden Horn. The five ships found themselves surrounded by a forest of sails but their crews fought back desperately, taking advantage of the fact that their large and slow merchant ships were much higher above the waterline than the light and swift galleys of the Turks. They hurled missiles down on their attackers and held them at bay long enough for the wind to change and to blow the Christian ships into the safety of the Golden Horn.³²

Mehmed was dismayed at the ease with which his fleet had been outclassed by its Genoese opponents. As the battle raged, he had watched from the shore and he had become so angry as the merchant ships escaped that he had ridden his horse into the sea, shouting and cursing. He vented his feeling by dismissing his admiral, Baltoglu, in disgrace and replacing him with Hamza, but it was a dispiriting moment for everyone in the Ottoman army. When he heard of the

defeat, Sheikh Akshemsettin retired to seek guidance in the Koran and wrote to the sultan to urge him not to give up the enterprise. There is no evidence that Mehmed seriously considered doing so, but there were plenty of things that could have gone wrong at this stage. Rumours were starting to circulate in the Ottoman camp that John Hunyadi had crossed the Danube with a Hungarian army and that a fleet was on its way from Venice, though these turned out to be unfounded. Even the great size of Mehmed's army could have worked against him. As spring turned to early summer and the days grew warmer, the threat of dysentery loomed over so great a concentration of human beings. A severe outbreak could have forced the sultan to break off the siege. For all his advantages, Mehmed's success was by no means a foregone conclusion.³³

What gave Mehmed victory in the end was not so much his many advantages in themselves but the good use that he made of them. His fleet might have been outclassed by the Venetians and Genoese, but Mehmed used the huge reserves of manpower that he had at his disposal to redress the balance. With his ships back at their base, Diplokionion, the sultan set thousands of men to the task of hauling some of them out of the water onto dry land and clearing the ground between the port and the Golden Horn. Using the trunks of felled trees greased with fat as rollers, the Turks manhandled some seventy-two ships overland, around the walls of Pera and downhill to the upper reaches of the Golden Horn. There they were launched into the water, circumventing the iron chain and the Venetian flotilla at the mouth of the harbour. The Venetian sailors were horrified when they saw what was happening:

When those in our fleet saw the galleys, you may be sure that they were greatly afraid, because they feared that one night they would come to attack our fleet, together with the fleet which was at Diplokionion.

They need not have worried. Once in the Golden Horn, the Turkish ships made no attempt to attack the Venetians or to assault the Sea Walls. They did not need to because they had already accomplished their purpose. By their very presence, they forced the emperor to garrison the Sea Walls along the Golden Horn, spreading the already stretched defence even more thinly so that two or three battlements now had only one man to defend them. Mehmed, in contrast, had been able to divert a large proportion of his force to the task of moving the ships without any perceptible slackening of the pressure on the Land Walls.³⁴

Mehmed was also particularly adept at employing flexible tactics to wear down the defences. While the cannon were battering the Land Walls, he set miners to work tunnelling under them, concentrating on the protruding section at Blachernae. The aim was to dig a tunnel under the walls and when it was complete, set fire to the wooden props that supported it. As the tunnel collapsed, so would the walls above. The stratagem failed. The defenders discovered the tunnels and led by Loukas Notaras brutally put a stop to the work by throwing down burning pitch that incinerated the miners inside. Nevertheless, the tunnels had served Mehmed well, by stretching and testing the defence and allowing no respite. The sultan used his cannon in the same way. While the largest cannon were left to batter the area around the Gate of St Romanos for the whole of the siege, others were moved around. On 5 May one was placed on a hill above Pera from where it could fire in a trajectory over the town and hit the Venetian ships that were concentrated around the boom in the Golden Horn. Again the tactic was not a resounding success. The only ship that was sunk was a supposedly neutral Genoese merchantman loaded with silk and wax. So a week later the cannon was moved to Blachernae, although it did not do much damage there either. Like the tunnels, however, it stretched and wore down the men garrisoning the Land Walls.³⁵

Perhaps the most fearsome of Mehmed's stratagems was his use of a kind of psychological warfare, which again exploited the sheer numbers of men at his disposal. Anyone stationed on the Land Walls would have looked out on a landscape that was covered with the tents and paraphernalia of the vast Ottoman army and that by night was aglow with myriad campfires, a sight that can hardly have raised the spirits of the defenders. Mehmed capitalised on the effect by ordering massed chanting by his troops at the Land Walls, a thunderous noise that could easily be heard by Barbaro and his fellow Venetians on their ships in the Golden Horn:

The same night we heard on the ships the wild shouting which these cursed pagans made around the walls of the poor city, shouting which truly was heard as far as the coast of Anatolia, twelve miles from the Turkish camp . . . and with the sound of their castanets and tambourines, it was a thing not to be believed, except by those who heard it.³⁶

As April became May, the strain on the defenders began to tell and they began to fall out among themselves. There was an ugly incident when Giovanni Giustiniani sent a message to Loukas Notaras asking him to bring up some cannon to the Land Walls. Notaras for some reason refused, perhaps because he considered that they were better employed where they already were. Giustiniani then angrily said to the grand duke 'Now who will prevent me from running you through with my sword?', a remark to which Notaras took great exception and which poisoned co-operation between the two men for the rest of the siege. There was a tense stand-off between the Venetians and Genoese of Pera who were participating in the defence. Both groups accused each other of wanting to sail away and abandon the city. The Venetians demanded that the Genoese remove the rudders and sails from their ships as a sign

of good faith, while the Genoese proclaimed that they would not be the ones to flee as they had wives and children in Pera.³⁷

A mood of fatalism slowly began to pervade the ranks. On 3 May a small Venetian galley was sent out from the Golden Horn to sail to the Dardanelles to see whether it could meet up with the Venetian fleet which it was hoped was sailing to the relief of Constantinople. Eighteen days later the vessel returned, with the depressing news that it had not encountered any sign of the fleet.³⁸ With no prospect of relief, the superstitious now began to see bad omens and evil portents everywhere. On the evening of 24 May, looking up from the deck of his ship, Nicolò Barbaro witnessed a terrifying sight:

At the first hour after sunset, the moon rose, being at this time at the full, so that it should have risen in the form of a complete circle; but it rose as if it were no more than a three-day moon . . .

After four hours the crescent was back at the full. As many in Constantinople must have known, it was simply an eclipse of the moon, but Barbaro and others saw it as a warning that 'was to tell Constantine the worthy emperor of Constantinople that his proud empire was about to come to an end'. At this moment of crisis, the Byzantines brought to the Land Walls the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria, an image that was believed to have been painted from the life by St Luke the Evangelist and which symbolised the Virgin's protection of Constantinople. It was solemnly paraded along the ramparts, although matters were not helped when the icon was accidentally dropped and fell to the ground on its face, providing more fuel for the prophecies of doom.³⁹ Mehmed, on the other hand, had no need of omens or icons. He knew that the defence was weakened and thinly spread and that morale was wavering. It now only remained to deliver the final blow.

On 28 May the sultan ordered that trumpets be sounded throughout the Turkish camp and then rode out on his white horse with an escort of thousands of cavalymen. He reviewed his army along the whole length of the Land Walls and then cantered off to Diplokionion to inspect his fleet. There was an air of jubilation in the Ottoman camp with fires being lit and music being played until about midnight, when everything fell silent. Mehmed had, in fact, ordered his troops to rest because he intended to launch his offensive in the small hours of the next day.⁴⁰

The plan of attack was simple. A series of human waves would overwhelm the defence at the Mesoteichion by sheer weight of numbers. Over the preceding weeks the Turks had been dumping earth, stones and anything else that came to hand into the moat, so that by now much of it that faced the Gate of St Romanos had been filled in. In the same area the outer and inner walls had been seriously damaged by cannon fire, and the challenge for the attackers now was to overwhelm the stockades which had been thrown up on Giustiniani's orders to plug the gaps. For this task Mehmed's troops were equipped with scaling ladders and grappling hooks.⁴¹

The sultan had organised his soldiers into three large waves. At about three hours before daybreak on 29 May, he sent forward the first wave consisting of his least valued troops, the Christians who were serving in his army to fulfil their rulers' obligations as Ottoman vassals. As they came forward, bells were rung throughout Constantinople and men rushed to the walls to repel the assault. The attackers crossed the filled-in moat, but as they attempted to scramble up the stockades and battered walls they found themselves bombarded by a hail of stones and other missiles. As those coming up from behind saw how many of their comrades were lying dead and injured, they lost courage and

retreated, only to find themselves confronted by Turkish troops with drawn scimitars who pushed them forward again. In the midst of the melee, Mehmed ordered his cannon to open fire, indiscriminately mowing down men on both sides. Not surprisingly, these ancillary troops suffered horrific casualties and failed to make a breakthrough but they had achieved the sultan's aim of wearing down the opposition. The second wave of the attack consisted of Turkish troops from Anatolia, who were rather better motivated and attacked the defences very bravely. Nevertheless, they too were held at bay by the defenders. Only now, after several hours of fighting, did Mehmed send in his best troops, the janissaries, resplendent in their tall white turbans. Handpicked and indoctrinated from childhood, these men were prepared to die for their sultan. Mehmed personally led them forward until they reached the moat, whereupon he prudently fell back while his elite fighters 'came on like wild beasts' and hurled themselves against the stockade, and there was a bitter struggle as they grappled with Giustiniani's men.⁴²

Even now, the defence held, in spite of the huge numerical advantage that the Turks enjoyed. That it finally buckled was put down by contemporary accounts to two pieces of very bad luck. In the confusion and mayhem of the janissary attack, Giovanni Giustiniani was struck in the side by either an arrow or a lead shot which passed clean through his breastplate. He was carried to the rear to seek medical attention, but in the chaos of the fighting no one gave thought to nominating a commander in his place. When his absence was noticed by his soldiers, they began to fall back from their positions, and that was noticed by the attackers who regrouped and pressed even harder on the stockade.⁴³ The withdrawal of Giustiniani might not have proved disastrous had not another stroke of misfortune allowed the Turks to circumvent the stockade and the remains of the outer wall. Emperor Constantine had ordered the opening of a small gateway in the inner

wall known as the Kerkopoporta to enable his men to reach the stockade more quickly and without being seen by the Turks. A group of about fifty Turkish soldiers who had penetrated the outer wall discovered this gateway, rushed through it and clambered up onto the southern stretch of the Blachernae walls. From there they could start hurling missiles on the defenders of the stockade below. It was now that the defence really began to crack and more and more men started to slip away from the stockade. The trickle became a flood as the Christians fled in a rush and fought each other to get through the openings in the inner wall and into the city beyond. Most of them crowded into the Gate of St Romanos, but so narrow was the passage and so great were the numbers that many of them were trampled to death in the crush. The panic was fuelled by the pursuing janissaries who came up from behind and cut down those at the back with their scimitars. They now took revenge for the privations they had suffered over the previous seven weeks and killed as many of their fleeing enemies as they could.⁴⁴

While all this was taking place at the Gate of St Romanos, on other parts of the Land Walls the fighting continued for some time, as the defenders there had no idea that the Turks had broken through. That only became apparent when they discovered that their enemies were now behind them as well as in front of them. Many immediately gave up and fled from their posts. One group of Cretan sailors carried on fighting for several hours but for the most part, with the breakthrough at the Gate of St Romanos, there was nothing to stop Mehmed's army from pouring into Constantinople. There was no power on Earth that could now avert what was going to happen.⁴⁵



On the Quayside

IT WAS LATER reckoned that about four thousand people, combatants and non-combatants, were killed by the victorious Turks on the morning of 29 May 1453, roughly half of them in the massacre on the walls following Giovanni Giustiniani's withdrawal and the Ottoman breakthrough. The most high-profile victim was Emperor Constantine. To start with no one was sure exactly what had happened to him and rumours about his fate abounded. Some said that they had seen him lying dead among the piles of corpses, others that he had hanged himself in despair, and later in the day the reports appeared to be confirmed when a head purporting to be that of Constantine was brought to the sultan. There can be no doubt that he died, although the accounts of how he met his end range from falling under repeated blows during an heroic last stand against thousands of janissaries to being cut down while making an ignominious headlong flight.¹ Alongside him fell many of his courtiers and advisers who 'did not want to see their country passing into slavery', men like Theodore Karystinos and Demetrius Palaiologos Metochites, who had been ambassador to the Council of Basel back in 1435. Theophilos Palaiologos, who had been an ardent supporter of the Union of Florence, was reported to have declared that he could not bear to survive the city's fall and hurled

himself at the advancing Turks, fighting valiantly until someone chopped him in two with an axe.²

Byzantines were not, of course, the only ones to perish. The Venetian diarist Barbaro carefully noted the names of the Venetian dead, although there were by no means as many of them as there were Byzantines. There were Turkish victims too. When the Ottomans broke through, Prince Orhan, whose maintenance had given Mehmed the pretext for his attack, tried to escape in disguise using his excellent knowledge of Greek as a cover. But his face was too well known and he was recognised by some of the Turkish soldiers who were running through the streets. Fleeing in despair, Orhan threw himself from the Sea Walls to perish on the rocks below and thereby avoided the doubtless worse fate that would have awaited him had he been captured. The bodies of many of the slain, whether Turks or Christians, ended up in the Golden Horn where, bloated in the heat of the day, they bobbed around 'like melons'.³

The killing, however, had not lasted for long. The first Ottoman troops to penetrate beyond the Land Walls had moved very gingerly, killing anyone they came across, in the expectation that more Byzantine and Italian troops would arrive to push them back. None came and only then did it become clear to the attackers just how few were the defenders who had held them off for so long. When they realised that resistance in that area had come to an end and that their erstwhile opponents were in full flight, the victors turned from killing to plundering the houses and palaces close to the Land Walls, which probably provided better pickings than the palace of Blachernae itself. The practice was for a soldier who entered a house to plant a flag with his emblem at the door, thus warning his comrades that it belonged to him. Churches and monasteries were also ransacked. Among the first to be looted were St John in Petra, which Manuel II's Spanish guests had visited back in 1403, and the nearby St Saviour in Chora. These

latest visitors were not interested in venerating relics but in seizing anything of value. As the looters burst into the Chora church they saw on the altar, surrounded by flickering candles, the Hodegetria icon of the Virgin Mary. It was pulled down unceremoniously and hacked into four pieces, so that the precious golden frame in which it was set could be shared out. The remains of the icon went onto a bonfire, along with relics and Gospel books whose gilded covers had been ripped off.⁴

Since the Turkish breakthrough took place at around six in the morning, many of those not involved in the fighting were still asleep, and in a city the size of Constantinople it would have taken some time for those who were not in the immediate vicinity of the Gate of St Romanos to realise what was happening. As the marauding troops spread east from the Blachernae district, they came to the church of St Theodosia. Incredibly, they had arrived in advance of any news of the events on the Land Walls, and an early morning service was still in progress. When the soldiers burst into the nave, they took the congregation completely by surprise. The headlong advance of the Turks was, however, slowed down by their pausing to loot, and this gave time for news of their approach to spread throughout the city. The first messenger who carried the tidings to the Forum of Constantine was not believed. To the crowds assembled there it seemed to be just another morning like any other with no obvious sign of the imminent catastrophe. But then more men arrived from the Land Walls and some of them were spattered with blood. Now at last the awful truth dawned and blind panic broke out as people fled from their homes carrying their children in their arms.⁵

Given the geography of Constantinople and the fact that the advancing Turks blocked the land route out, there were limited options for escape. Some took sanctuary in Hagia Sophia, believing an old prophecy that if an enemy ever did break into Constantinople an angel would descend from Heaven and drive them back before they reached

the cathedral. Others preferred to put their faith in ships rather than angels and rushed for the gates in the Sea Walls that gave access to the harbour area along the Golden Horn. Many streamed through before the keepers decided to close the heavy gates, mistakenly believing that in this way they would encourage resistance to the Turks.⁶ Those who reached the quayside found no ships moored there, but out on the waters of the inlet were anchored fifteen Venetian and Genoese vessels. It would have been unsafe for them to approach too close to the shore, so that those who wanted to reach them had to find a boat to row out. It was the Italians who had the boats and it was they who were getting to the ships. Many of the Venetians had got away unscathed from their posts at Blachernae, where no breakthrough had occurred, and were being taken on board by their compatriots. Among the Genoese, the wounded Giovanni Giustiniani and many of his contingent were likewise rescued by their fellow countrymen. Some Byzantines managed to secure a place on a Genoese ship commanded by Giorgio Doria, but they were mainly wealthy members of prominent families who doubtless paid handsomely for their place. Those left on the quayside who were not wealthy, Venetian or Genoese, were not so lucky. Some did find boats and tried to row out, but in the chaos and confusion too many people crowded in and several of these frail craft overturned and sank, drowning the occupants. Only a few individuals made it. One of them was Giacomo Tetaldi, a Florentine merchant who had been in Constantinople on business. On reaching the quayside, he threw off his clothes, dived into the water and swam out to a Venetian ship, whose crew obligingly hauled him aboard.⁷

The captains of the Venetian and Genoese ships waited in the Golden Horn until midday to rescue as many as they could, but when it became evident that there was no point in lingering further they started to sail towards the mouth of the harbour. After putting in briefly at Pera, they reached the iron chain that blocked the way to the

Bosporus and this had to be broken with axes to let the ships through. The seventy-two Ottoman vessels that were in the Golden Horn made no attempt to stop or pursue them. When it became clear that the defences had collapsed, the Turkish crews of these ships saw no point in fighting further. They beached their vessels on the foreshore in front of the Sea Walls and hurried into the city so as not to be left out in the scramble for loot. The main fleet under Hamza was moving south from Diplokionion but it too was more intent on plunder. That gave the Christian ships a clear run out of the harbour and into the Bosporus beyond, from where they could sail south and make good their escape. Given that each ship carried about four hundred people, it is likely that some six thousand escaped with the fleet, the vast majority of whom were Venetians or Genoese.⁸

As the ships left, the quayside along the Golden Horn was still crowded with people who pleaded in vain with the crews to come and save them. A few managed to get themselves rowed across to the comparative safety of Pera, but for most there was now no escape. Their fate was slavery. Once the defence had evaporated, it was no longer in the interest of the victors to kill but rather to look for young and healthy captives who would fetch a high price in a slave market or distinguished ones who would command a high ransom. Women and children were particularly valuable. They were rounded up in the streets or dragged from the houses and churches where they had taken refuge. Those who had crowded into the cathedral of Hagia Sophia found that it provided no sanctuary. When the Turkish soldiers arrived they just broke down the doors with axes and pulled out their victims one by one. In the Venetian quarter, merchants who had hidden themselves in cellars were found, dragged out and subjected to the same treatment, their long-standing privileges availing them little now. Some were herded onto ships, others were taken to tents in the Ottoman camp outside the Land Walls to be kept until they could be sold.

Money was not the only consideration. Freed of any restraint, the victors could literally do anything they pleased. There was wholesale rape and sexual abuse, with women being taken off to the ships for precisely that purpose. It was an enormous human haul but even so some Turkish soldiers expressed disappointment that so many of the defenders had been killed, because they would have fetched a high price if they had been captured and sold.⁹

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Away from the mayhem, Mehmed II was still at the Ottoman camp outside the Land Walls. While he allowed his soldiers to enjoy the spoils, he must have basked in the thought that at the age of twenty-one and after only two years as sultan, he had succeeded where Bayezid, his father Murad and all the hosts of Islam across the ages had failed. It was only in the early afternoon, long after all hostilities had ended, that the sultan rode in through the Gate of St Romanos with his viziers and commanders, surrounded by an escort of archers, to view his prize. Like the Byzantine emperors before him, he rode proudly down the Mese towards the Augousteion and Hagia Sophia, passing the piles of corpses and the ransacked houses and churches. Even Mehmed was rather taken aback when he saw for himself the magnitude of the devastation that his troops had wrought, and he is said to have exclaimed sadly, 'What a city we have given over to plundering and destruction!', and to have shed a tear. He did not neglect to play the role of the pious warrior of Islam, however. When he reached Hagia Sophia, he dismounted from his horse, lay face down on the earth and sprinkled a handful of dust on his turban, a gesture of humility before God, the real victor. He then entered the cathedral and instructed a muezzin to climb into the pulpit and to proclaim that there was no God but God and that Mohammed was His prophet.¹⁰

The conventional pieties over and any charge of hubris allayed, the sultan gave his attention to some last pieces of unfinished business. He was particularly anxious to know the whereabouts of both the emperor and Prince Orhan but was soon reassured that they were dead when their heads were brought to him. Two high-profile Latins, however, had survived, the Venetian bailey Girolamo Minotto and the Catalan consul Pedro Juliano, and they had been unfortunate enough not to be able to reach the ships before they were captured. Both had played an important part in the defence. Minotto had organised the Venetian garrison on the Blachernae section of the Land Walls while Juliano had guarded the Augousteion district from a lookout tower near the Hippodrome. Mehmed probably regarded their participation as a breach of faith since he was not officially at war with either Venice or Alfonso of Aragon. That is probably why he ordered them both to be executed, along with their sons. Murad II would probably have shown more magnanimity in victory.¹¹

One big name remained unaccounted for, the wealthiest man in Constantinople and the emperor's chief adviser: the grand duke Loukas Notaras. During the siege, Notaras had been responsible for guarding a stretch of the Sea Walls along the upper reaches of the Golden Horn and he had also been in charge of a kind of mobile reserve of one hundred horsemen, which he could lead to wherever they were most needed.¹² According to Doukas, in the early hours of 29 May, when they realised that all was lost on the Land Walls, Notaras and his companions abandoned their posts and tried to reach their homes and families. Notaras arrived back to find that his wife, sons and daughters had barricaded themselves into their house in the hope of avoiding capture. It is unlikely that they would have been able to hold out for long, because the place was by now surrounded by Turkish soldiers who were making a determined effort to break in and lay hands on what promised to be a rich haul of moveable wealth. Before they could do

so, the sultan intervened and sent a troop of soldiers to Notaras's mansion. The surrounding Turks were bought off with generous gifts of silver coins and a guard was placed on the house to prevent any further molestation. With these matters settled, Mehmed returned to his tent outside the Land Walls.

The following morning, Mehmed and his retinue entered Constantinople a second time. He had decided that Notaras was not going to suffer the fate of Minotto and Julianio, and with extraordinary condescension the sultan paid a visit in person to his house. He met Notaras and his sons and assured the grand duke that he planned to appoint him as governor of the newly conquered city in succession to the late Demetrius Metochites. The sultan even sat at the bedside of Notaras's sick wife, who was a member of the Palaiologos family. Such favourable treatment in stark contrast to the fate of others inevitably suggests that Notaras might have done something to ingratiate himself with Mehmed. Hostile chroniclers, notably Archbishop Leonard of Chios, who hated Notaras because he regarded the grand duke as an opponent of the Union of Florence, gave a different version of events to explain his survival. According to them, when Notaras abandoned his post he did not return to his family but attempted to escape with Orhan. When the Turkish prince was killed, Notaras was seized and brought before the sultan who demanded to know why the grand duke had not persuaded the emperor to sue for peace and so save all the bloodshed. Notaras was quick to put the blame on the Genoese of Pera and the Venetians who, he claimed, had urged the emperor to resist. More seriously, he broke faith with Halil Pasha who for so long had been the paid friend of the Byzantines at the Ottoman court. The grand duke allegedly handed over to Mehmed letters written by Halil to the emperor encouraging him to stand firm against the Ottoman siege. Another, later tradition even claimed that Notaras had literally tried to purchase his life by handing over to Mehmed all the treasure

that he had hoarded during the siege. These versions certainly give reasons why Notaras may have been spared but they are not particularly convincing. By the time Notaras met with Mehmed, Leonard of Chios was far from the scene of action and he could have had no first-hand knowledge of what had passed between the sultan and the grand duke.¹³

Whatever the reasons for Mehmed's original clemency towards Notaras, something was to make him change his mind. On the evening of 30 May, only hours after Mehmed had made his sympathetic visit to the bed of Notaras's wife, the grand duke was led out to the gate of the palace of Blachernae along with his son and his son-in-law, Theodore Kantakouzenos. They were bluntly informed that they were all to be executed. Faced with his imminent demise, Notaras was said to have behaved with extraordinary courage. He made the request that the young men should die first and so be spared the sight of his own death. They were made to kneel down and the executioner stepped forward to decapitate them one after another with a scimitar. Notaras was allowed to withdraw briefly to a nearby chapel to pray and when he emerged the two headless bodies were still twitching on the ground. The grand duke then suffered the same fate.

There are three completely different explanations for Mehmed's volte-face over Notaras. One tradition, which has been very widely believed, was that during the evening after his visit to the Notaras mansion, Mehmed got drunk at a banquet in the palace of Blachernae. In his cups he decided that he wanted to molest Loukas Notaras's fourteen-year-old son whom he had met that morning. The chief eunuch was sent to the house of Notaras to collect the child, but the grand duke courageously refused to hand him over. Outraged at this defiance, Mehmed had both Notaras and the boy killed, along with Kantakouzenos. It is not impossible that this happened for Mehmed was perfectly capable of depravity and cruelty, but it seems unlikely.

The story smacks of sensationalism and anti-Ottoman propaganda and is quite obviously not the result of eyewitness observation. The second, completely different version of Notaras's death makes no mention of Mehmed's alleged pederasty. Here, the high-minded sultan was so disgusted by Notaras's willingness to hand over the money which he had withheld from the emperor, that he had the grand duke put to death.¹⁴

The most likely version of events is the third one given by Michael Kritovoulos, a Byzantine noble who later wrote a biography of Mehmed:

He contemplated making Notaras commandant of the City, and putting him in charge of its repopulation, and he had advised with him previously regarding this. But the arrows of envy laid that man and his sons low with mortal wounds, and they were condemned to an unjust death. For some men of influence, I know not whence, moved by envy and hatred towards those men, persuaded him, since he had them in his power, to put them out of the way, saying that Romans, and especially prominent ones, not only ought not to live in this city or occupy any positions but even should not live at all . . .¹⁵

It would seem that Mehmed's first instinct had been a genuine desire to keep some members of the former Byzantine regime in place, especially those with anti-Union and pro-Ottoman opinions, and make use of their experience and expertise. Voices had been raised against the plan by his advisers and the still-inexperienced Mehmed had been swayed enough to change his mind. It would seem that a number of other captured Byzantine nobles were executed at the same time and it was a Turk, Suleyman Bey, rather than a Byzantine, who was appointed as the governor of the newly acquired city. Later Mehmed was to

change his mind again and return to the policy of attempting to integrate the dispossessed Byzantine elite.¹⁶

Mehmed now attended to the rest of the business left by his victory. On the day following Notaras's execution, he called a halt to the looting as the customary three days had now passed and he ordered his troops to return to their tents outside the city. The corpses that were still piled up around the Gate of St Romanos were gathered up and taken to the moat outside the Land Walls where they were burned, while the walls themselves were repaired by teams of workmen. The Turkish camp presented a peculiar sight. The soldiers were eating their meals off silver communion plates that they had taken from churches and drinking wine out of chalices. Some were walking around dressed in ecclesiastical vestments.¹⁷

Accounts were settled with the Genoese of Pera who had played such an ambivalent role in the siege. When the inhabitants of the town had realised that Constantinople was lost on 29 May, many of them had opted to flee, judging that Pera would be the next victim. They had rushed down to the harbour carrying whatever they could and rowed out to the ships anchored there. In the general press and confusion, coins and jewels were scattered on the ground or dropped into the sea. The podestà, Angelo Lomellino, however, did not flee. He sent a message to the captains of the ships begging them to remain at anchor and even had the harbour gates in the walls closed to prevent people from getting to the ships. He did not succeed, for several ships made it out of Pera and headed for the safety of the Genoese-ruled island of Chios. In the meantime Lomellino had made contact with Zaganos Pasha, who commanded the Ottoman detachments in the area, and on being assured that Pera would not suffer the treatment being meted out in Constantinople, he had handed over the keys.¹⁸

The subsequent treaty between the sultan and the Genoese was concluded on 1 June and incorporated the undertaking made by Zaganos Pasha that the people of Pera:

are to keep their property and their houses, their shops and their vineyards, their mills and their ships, their boats and their merchandise entire, and their women and children according to their wishes. They may sell their goods as freely as in any other part of our dominions.

The sultan agreed not to demolish the fortifications of Pera, to allow freedom of Christian worship, not to take children for the janissary corps and not to turn churches into mosques. The only disabilities to be placed on the Genoese was the payment of a poll tax, to which all non-Muslim subjects of the sultan were liable, and a ban on the use of bells in their churches. On the face of it, the treaty was a most advantageous one, given the limited room for negotiation that Lomellino had.¹⁹

Mehmed, however, was well aware that the Genoese had breached their supposed neutrality by sending troops to assist in the defence of the Land Walls. One of these soldiers was Lomellino's own nephew, who had been captured and was now in the sultan's retinue. Mehmed therefore felt under no obligation to adhere to the letter of the treaty. That became very clear on 3 June when he visited Pera in person. In direct contravention of the recent treaty, he gave orders that the landward defences of the town were to be demolished, although those along the harbour were allowed to stand. Mehmed's officers conducted a search through the town for Genoese known to have fought on the Land Walls, though without success. It further emerged that there was a limit on the guarantee that property would be safe. Those merchants who had fled Pera on 29 May were given three months to return and if they failed to do so their houses and property would pass to the sultan. For Angelo Lomellino, the turn of events must have seemed most dispiriting, and on 23 June he wrote to his brother in Genoa informing him that he had resigned as podestà and that he was only continuing in office for as long as it took to find a successor:

Forgive me if I am not writing very clearly; my mind is so disordered that I hardly know what I am doing. For the last eighteen months I have had nothing but work and worries and in one day, all our labours went for nothing . . .²⁰

There was one last score that had to be settled. Mehmed II had probably nurtured a grudge against Halil Pasha ever since the chief vizier had brought his first, premature reign to an end in 1446 by recalling Murad II from Manisa. Now, secure in the glory of his achievement, the sultan could do away with his former mentor, who was arrested and sent back to Adrianople chained in a cart. The vizier's huge fortune, amounting to some 120,000 gold pieces, no doubt partly amassed from the bribes paid by the Byzantines, was seized for Mehmed's coffers and later in the summer Halil was executed. His family and friends were forbidden to mourn for him.²¹

With the initial business complete, Mehmed prepared to return to Adrianople. In the long term, he planned to make Constantinople his capital, but at present it lacked the amenities that a ruler of his importance expected. He had no desire to reside in the dilapidated palace of his late foe and gave orders for work to begin on a new palace in the area of the Forum of Theodosius. It would not be completed for two years, during which time Mehmed preferred the comforts of Adrianople. He arrived back on 21 June to a tumultuous welcome from the people of the city and the insincere congratulations of the hastily despatched representatives of neighbouring Christian rulers.²²

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Behind the cold military logic of Mehmed's victory lay a demographic catastrophe of colossal proportions. At a stroke an entire society had been overwhelmed and destroyed, with terrible consequences for

everyone in the city. The population of Constantinople in 1453 was estimated at between fifty and sixty thousand, including women, children, the elderly and all the foreign merchants.²³ The immediate fate of those who were not killed and who did not escape in the ships was to be captivity and slavery. In the long term, the human flotsam and jetsam was to be scattered over the Christian and Muslim worlds for decades to come.

By the time Mehmed left Constantinople, most of its Christian inhabitants had departed too. Many were marched to Adrianople where there was a flourishing slave market and where lines of captives in chains, begging in the streets, were a familiar sight. That was the fate of the monk Gennadios, the former George Scholarios. He had still been in his cell at the Pantokrator monastery when the Turks broke through on 29 May. He was hustled out of the building by his nephew, who had been involved in the fighting but now sought to escape the city. The pair did not get far and were rounded up and taken to Adrianople along with everyone else. They were lucky enough to be bought by a Turkish nobleman who treated them with kindness and respect. Others were taken out by ship bound for slave markets in Cairo and other great cities of the Islamic world. Mehmed himself despatched some four hundred young men as gifts to the Muslim rulers of Egypt, Tunisia and Granada.²⁴

The vast majority of these captives would have spent the rest of their lives in servitude with no hope of seeing their families, homes or countries ever again. For the wealthy and well connected, however, there was a way out. Their families could redeem them for a ransom that was proportionate to their perceived importance. For the twenty-nine prominent Venetian prisoners, who had a government and families back in Venice to help them, this was quickly arranged and they were home within a year. Their ransoms generally ranged from 800 to 2,000 ducats, although Catarin Contarini, who had commanded the garrison at the

Golden Gate during the siege, was rumoured to have been obliged to pay an extra 7,000 to the sultan to escape death. Venetians of lower social rank such as merchants and soldiers were ransomed for between ten and forty ducats. The same applied to the Genoese who could raise finance on Chios to get their relatives out of Constantinople. The podestà Angelo Lomellino was not so fortunate. Although he had money to hand, he was unable to ransom his nephew Imperiali. The young man had passed into the possession of the sultan and Mehmed did not want to part with him because he wanted to have some Latins at his court.²⁵

For the Byzantines who had been wealthy before the siege, raising ransoms was rather more difficult because in many cases their entire fortunes were lost when Constantinople fell. Some were simply very lucky, most notably Cardinal Isidore, who went through another series of adventures to rival his epic journey to the Council of Basel in 1433–4 and his dramatic escape from Russia in 1442. When the Turks broke into the city on 29 May, the cardinal was injured in the face by an arrow, but he had still rushed to Hagia Sophia in the hope of gathering more men for further resistance. When that possibility faded, he mingled with the other refugees in the cathedral after allegedly having exchanged his cardinal's robes for the clothes of a corpse that he found lying in the streets. Along with everyone else he was dragged off to the Turkish camp. Since he appeared to be a person of no particular importance, his captor accepted a ransom of a hundred ducats from someone who had realised who Isidore was and he was allowed to cross to Pera. It soon became clear that Pera would not be safe for long, since Mehmed's men were combing the streets looking for leaders of the defence like Isidore who, had he been captured, would probably have ended up like Minotto and Notaras. So Isidore boarded a Turkish vessel that took him across the Sea of Marmara, the bandages that covered the wound on his face helping him to maintain his disguise. Reaching

Bursa, he managed to travel down to Phokaia from where he was able to cross in a small boat to Genoese-held Chios.²⁶

Some captured Byzantines were fortunate enough to have friends and family on the outside who could raise that required ransom. George Sphrantzes had to endure slavery for four months after which someone paid the money to buy his release, enabling him to depart first to Mistra and then to the court of the Despot Thomas at Patras. His wife Helena and his two teenage children remained in captivity. They had initially been taken into the possession of some elderly Turks in Adrianople who treated them well. They were then bought by the sultan's Master of Horse, who made a large profit by selling the children on to the sultan himself. Sphrantzes was able to travel to Adrianople in September 1454, to pay his wife's ransom and then to take her with her servant, Chrysovergina, back to Patras. His children, however, were not so lucky. Both had been taken into the sultan's household and were never redeemed. His son John, so Sphrantzes claimed, was killed by Mehmed II at the end of 1453 because it was believed that the boy was plotting against the sultan's life. Sphrantzes's daughter Thamar died of an infectious disease in the harem in 1455, aged only fourteen.²⁷

When it came to paying ransoms, money and connections outside Byzantium, especially in the west, were particularly valuable. One family that had both in abundance was that of Notaras. Much of their money was held in the Bank of St George in Genoa, and the grand duke had had a network of friends and contacts in the west. These advantages had not been able to save the grand duke, his son or his son-in-law, nor did they help Loukas's wife. In spite of her ailing condition, the sultan insisted that she accompany him back to Adrianople in June 1453. Her condition worsened during the long journey through the summer heat, and she died and was buried in a Thracian village on the road. Notaras's surviving children were all sold as slaves, his youngest son Isaac being taken into the sultan's household. They had not, however, been

forgotten. In the spring following the fall of Constantinople, some Genoese envoys to the court of Mehmed II were given instructions to search for two daughters and a son of the grand duke who were believed to have survived the disaster. Notaras had, after all, been a Genoese citizen and the republic had a duty to help his family if it could. The Genoese government was also probably being lobbied by Anna Notaras, the grand duke's youngest daughter, who had been sent to Italy for safety shortly before the fall of Constantinople. In the event, three daughters, Euphrosyne, Theodora and Maria, were located. They were ransomed by the Genoese for an unknown sum and were freed to travel to Genoa to join their sister Anna, the money in all likelihood coming from the Notaras account in the Bank of St George. No ransom was paid for Isaac. He is said to have succeeded in escaping from the sultan's palace in Adrianople and he made his way independently to Italy.²⁸

Another well-connected family was that of Chrysoloras. They did not have much in the way of business links with Italy, but they had a web of contacts with Italian humanists going back to the days when Manuel Chrysoloras had taught in Florence and had toured the west as the ambassador of Manuel II. There were ties of kinship too because the Milanese courtier, Francesco Filelfo, who had lived in Constantinople during the 1420s, had married into the clan. When news came that his mother-in-law and sisters-in-law had been made prisoners, Filelfo wrote a sycophantic letter to the sultan, enclosing a laudatory ode in elegant Greek. He informed Mehmed that his victory had been given to him by God:

For if, when the time of judgment comes, He punishes the wicked,
He never refuses his help to the good. The sins of the Greeks have
delivered Constantinople to you . . .

But, he added, sometimes the just are mingled with the unjust and his virtuous relatives had been enslaved, not, Filelfo hastened to say, by

Turks but by Jews. He implored the sultan to order their release. Perhaps swayed by the flattery, Mehmed agreed to the request and the women were able to make their way to Crete.²⁹

The vast majority of Byzantines, however, did not have either the luck of Cardinal Isidore or the wealth and connections of the Notaras and Chrysoloras families, and they had no alternative but to beg. It often happened that one member of a family, usually the male head of the household, would be released by his captor and sent off to raise his own ransom and that of his relatives. Byzantines who had opted to take service with the sultan, such as Nicholas Isidoros who was employed as a judge at Adrianople, were an obvious target of appeals from people in this situation. A number of letters have been preserved that were written to Isidoros during the summer months of 1453. A group of clergymen at Gallipoli wrote to ask him for help in ransoming a priest called John, who had been one of the clergy in the imperial palace and had been renowned for his singing voice. He had probably been taken to Gallipoli on one of Admiral Hamza's ships and there he passed to a harsh master who kept him in chains. The local clergy were trying to have him released, but his owner demanded the very high sum of 2,500 aspers and insisted on the full amount, refusing to release John on payment of a deposit as was usually the custom. Since they could not afford to pay, the Gallipoli priests appealed to the judge to lend them the money, promising that John would pay it back once he was released for he was widely known and would soon raise the money among his friends. Another supplicant, a priest who signed himself simply 'Demetrius the unfortunate', approached Nicholas Isidoros in July 1453, in the hope that he would supply him with gifts to appease the Turkish eunuch who had become the master of his parents and children and whom Demetrius described as a 'wicked dog'. Isidoros's response to such appeals seems to have been a favourable one. His position in Ottoman service did not mean that he had cut himself off from his fellow

Orthodox Christians and it would seem that he not only loaned money for the redemption of captives but paid ransoms himself as well.³⁰

In their search for help, many refugees travelled out of Ottoman territory into surrounding areas that were still under Christian rule, such as the principality of Wallachia. In Serbia the Despot George Brankovich, welcomed them and paid many ransoms as an act of charity. His representatives redeemed a hundred nuns at Adrianople in August 1453 and probably many other Byzantines, who headed for Serbian territory as soon as they were free and settled in Smederevo. Considerable numbers arrived at the port of Ragusa on the coast of Croatia, which only recently had been negotiating trading concessions in Constantinople with Constantine XI. Here too they were received kindly, at least to start with. The city's Great Council gave a gift of sixty gold pieces to three Byzantine noblemen who turned up in February 1454, no doubt to help them with the payment of ransoms. As more and more started to arrive, however, the government of Ragusa began to feel alarmed. Like all the small Christian states of the Balkans, Ragusa had a treaty with the Ottoman sultan, paying an annual tribute of 1,000 ducats for the privilege of remaining in existence. The presence of so many Byzantines within their walls might, they feared, be taken as a sign of hostility. So on 8 February, only two days after the gift to the three noblemen, the city fathers closed their gates.³¹

Those who were shut out of Ragusa may not, in any case, have seen the city state as their final destination but as an embarkation point for Italy. In March 1454 refugees from Constantinople were reported in Milan and by October some of them had reached France and Germany. In February the following year, some turned up in England and they were subsequently reported in Scotland and Spain, moving from town to town and begging for alms to pay for the ransom of their families. In appealing to Catholic Europe in this way, they were mirroring the diplomatic practice of Manuel II and his sons. They hoped to evoke the

sympathy that was felt for fellow Christians who had been driven from their homeland by infidels, a feeling that was in no way lessened by the controversy over the Union of Florence. As with Manuel, they were given money by concerned individuals who were horrified by the news of the fall of Constantinople. The ecclesiastical authorities assisted by giving the refugees letters of indulgence, which promised a spiritual reward to anyone who helped the bearer.³²

One such wandering refugee was Demetrius Leontaris. Before 29 May, he had been numbered among Constantinople's privileged elite. He was the grandson of Manuel II's faithful courtier, Demetrius Laskaris Leontaris, and he had married the daughter of Demetrius Palaiologos Metochites. Taken prisoner like so many others, Leontaris had his ransom paid early on, enabling him to travel to Smederevo. He was joined by his younger brother Michael and he might have hoped to have rescued his wife too, but she died in Adrianople in 1455. By May 1459, Demetrius and Michael had crossed the Adriatic to Italy, probably in the hope of raising the ransoms of Demetrius's four children who were still in captivity. In Mantua they encountered Pope Pius II (r.1458–1465), who had called a congress to the town to discuss the Catholic response to the fall of Constantinople. Pius provided the Leontaris brothers with letters of indulgence, which told how they had once enjoyed wealth and position in Constantinople and were now reduced to beggary, and which promised remission of sins to anyone who gave them alms towards the ransoms. Armed with this document the brothers travelled across Europe collecting contributions. By August 1462 they were in Brussels where they were given a gift of money by the duke of Burgundy.

The refugees did not rely solely on voluntary contributions. Many travelled with family heirlooms such as icons and Greek Gospel books, which they hoped to sell. A group of Byzantines who reached Rome succeeded in selling an icon of the Virgin Mary, assuring the buyer that

it had once hung in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. Some carried relics of dubious provenance. In Florence one man produced what he claimed was part of the Cross on which Christ was crucified, part of the robe of the Virgin Mary, a piece of the sponge that was offered to Christ while he was on the cross and some fragments of the bread used at the Last Supper. The city authorities were impressed and gave him a thousand florins. The government of Venice proved less willing to part with their cash. They were unconvinced by the tunic of Christ that they were offered by another refugee and declined to pay the asking price of 10,000 ducats. In spite of the sympathy and the occasional sale, one suspects that few of these wandering refugees ever succeeded in raising enough money to go back to the east and redeem their families. Demetrius Leontaris was still in Italy in 1465 and probably never returned to Constantinople. There must have been thousands like him of whom no record survives.³³

As for the city that they had left behind, for some months after Mehmed's victory Constantinople lay ruined and depopulated, inhabited only by a few Turkish settlers who had installed themselves in some of the churches and monasteries that had remained intact.³⁴ It was no longer the capital of the shadow empire, but a new acquisition of the sultan ruled over by his appointee, Suleyman Bey. The emperor was dead, Hagia Sophia was a mosque and the palace of Blachernae was deserted. The courtiers who had thronged the corridors of power, the priests who had chanted the daily liturgy and the monks who had breathed hellfire against the Union of Florence were all gone. But the fall of Constantinople did not mark the end of Byzantium. There were still some parts of the empire that had not submitted to the sultan. There the old debate was as fierce as ever and the survivors would have to make their final choice between East and West.



East or West?

IN THE SCATTERED territories and islands that still bore allegiance to the Byzantine emperor in 1453, the choice was soon made. The ships that had escaped from the Golden Horn on the morning of 29 May sailed south through the Dardanelles and put in at the Byzantine islands of Limnos and Imbros, where the news of the fall of Constantinople was greeted with shock, terror and panic. On Limnos two hundred inhabitants along with their wives and children, believing that the Ottoman fleet would shortly be sailing south to attack the island, had gone on board the Italian ships which then continued on their way. The vessel bearing the injured Giovanni Giustiniani finally reached Chios on 10 June. The Genoese commander had by that time died of his wound, but for the rest of the passengers and crew, Latins and Byzantines, the island was a safe haven at last from the terrible events of the previous month.

Not everyone in the Byzantine islands reacted to the tidings by fleeing to the Latins, however. On Imbros the Byzantine governor, Michael Kritovoulos, sought to calm the situation by sending messengers armed with gifts to the Ottoman admiral Hamza, who had now returned with his fleet to Gallipoli. Kritovoulos then agreed to hand the islands of Limnos, Thasos and Imbros over to the sultan, provided

that the inhabitants were left as they were before. On this occasion, the terms were honoured, the islanders having done nothing to incur the sultan's wrath, unlike the Genoese of Pera. Mehmed was also generous to the town of Selymbria on the Thracian mainland, which had held out during the siege of Constantinople. It probably opened its gates to the Ottomans soon after 29 May and was not subjected to sack or pillage.¹

So the only part of Byzantine territory that was still in the possession of the Palaiologos family at the end of the summer of 1453 and whose inhabitants had still to choose between east and west was the Morea. When Mehmed's intentions had become clear during 1452, Constantine XI had sent an urgent appeal for help to his brothers, the despots Demetrius and Thomas, but they had been prevented from intervening by a well-timed Turkish invasion of the Morea during the autumn. When news arrived at Mistra and Patras of the fall of Constantinople, it was greeted with the same outright terror as it had been in the islands. Many of the wealthier Moreots considering taking ship for Italy there and then. It soon became clear, however, that Mehmed II had no plans to move south. When emissaries of the despots visited the sultan at Adrianople with great trepidation some months after his victory, there was no demand for the surrender of their territory. Instead, the despots were merely instructed to pay an annual tribute of 10,000 ducats. Once their ransoms had been paid, therefore, many of Constantine XI's courtiers made their way to the Morea. John Argyropoulos and George Sphrantzes went to the court of Thomas Palaiologos at Patras. Thomas seems to have been particularly glad to receive Sphrantzes and gave him the lordship of the village of Kertetzi. Others such as Frankoulios Servopoulos, who had formerly been secretary to the ill-fated Venetian bailey Minotto, went to Demetrius Palaiologos's capital at Mistra. This influx of influential men must have given the courts of the two despots the feeling of a government in exile.

Some people were even of the opinion that Demetrius should now be proclaimed emperor in succession to the deceased Constantine. After all, the Byzantine Morea was a considerable tract of territory and it remained fertile and wealthy, in spite of the Ottoman incursions of recent years. There seemed for a moment to be a possibility that Byzantium could live on in the south.²

In practice, the long-term survival of the Byzantine Morea was not a viable proposition, for the two despots were experiencing considerable difficulties governing their territories. Over recent years, large numbers of Albanians had been migrating to the Peloponnese and the despots had welcomed them as a useful addition to their reserves of manpower. Then in September 1453 the Albanian population of the Morea had allied themselves with some of the local Byzantine landowners and had risen in revolt against the despots, proclaiming a certain Manuel Kantakouzenos as their ruler instead. Demetrius and Thomas found themselves besieged in Mistra and Patras. With no hope of regaining control over the surrounding countryside, they made a desperate appeal to the only power strong enough to restore their authority: the Ottoman sultan. Mehmed responded quickly. In December he sent Umur Pasha, son of Turahan, with a small force to keep the Albanians at bay, and the following October Turahan himself appeared with a large army. The Albanians were crushed and Manuel Kantakouzenos had to flee for his life. The despots were restored to power but their subordination to the sultan had been reinforced and their annual tribute was increased to 12,000 ducats. It was now manifest that they would rule the Peloponnese only as long as the sultan chose.³

That might have been the end of the matter. By accepting the sultan's military assistance, Demetrius and Thomas had apparently thrown in their lot with him. But it was not the end. The brothers had lived all their adult lives against a background of negotiating with the

powers of the west behind the sultan's back and of intriguing against each other and against other members of their family. They were not going to abandon either activity now. After all, the debate about whether to accept subordination to the sultan or to seek some kind of military assistance from the west had not gone away. In the past, Demetrius had stood for those who were opposed to the Union of Florence and sought to find an accommodation with the Ottomans. He had always personally been opposed to the Union and was strongly influenced by his wife Theodora, who was deeply conservative in matters of religion.⁴ Thomas seems to have pursued a more western policy, for in the past he had followed his brothers John VIII and Constantine XI in accepting the Union in the hope that it would lead to western military aid against the Ottomans. The last six years of the despots' rule were dominated by this issue, which inevitably became fused with the continuing rivalry between them.

As in the past, however, the lines of demarcation were not clearly drawn. Neither of the brothers adhered rigidly to one or other course of action, trimming their sails to whatever seemed the most promising wind blowing at the time. To start with, that wind seemed to be blowing from the west and in spite of all the previous disappointments, the outlook for a Latin military response looked promising. The news of the fall of Constantinople had been received with as much horror in Catholic Europe as it had been in the Morea. It reached the Venetian colony of Crete on 29 June when the first of the Venetian ships that had made it out of the Golden Horn sailed into the harbour at Candia and those on board them blurted out what had happened:

They said that on the twenty-ninth of the month of May . . . the army of the Turkish sultan Mehmed entered Constantinople. They said that the emperor, Lord Constantine Dragases Palaiologos was killed. There was great sorrow and much crying in Crete when this

doleful message arrived. Nothing worse than this has happened or will happen. May the Lord God help us and liberate us from this grave threat.⁵

On the same day, at around eleven o'clock in the morning, a ship moored at the landing stages at the Bacino of St Mark in Venice. It was a swift light galley that had sailed from the island of Negroponte with letters from the bailey and had quickly overtaken the heavy merchant ships on their way to Crete. The letters were rushed to the Doge's Palace, but their contents could not be kept secret. Before long, a large crowd was gathering in St Mark's square and cries and wails went up from those who had relatives and property in Constantinople. There were also shouts of anger directed at the palace as people demanded to know why nothing had been done to prevent the catastrophe.⁶

From Venice the tidings spread south to Rome and north across the Alps. At Graz in Austria, Cardinal Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II (r. 1438–1464), wrote to a fellow cardinal on 27 July that there was a story going round that Constantinople had been destroyed and Pera handed over to the Turks. Within days, the rumours coalesced into fact and Piccolomini lamented:

I grieve that Saint Sophia, the most famous church in all the world, has been ruined or polluted. I grieve that saints' basilicas without number, built with wondrous skill, should lie beneath the desolation or defilement of Mohammed. . . . Now Mohammed reigns among us. Now the Turk hangs over our very heads.⁷

The dismay was as palpable even in lands far from the Ottoman threat. In England solemn processions were held in churches and cathedrals to pray for the defeat of the Turks when it was learned that 'the cite of

Constantyn the Noble [had been] lost by Cristen men and wonne by the prynce of Turkes named Mahumet'.⁸

Everyone was agreed that something had to be done urgently and Pope Nicholas V hastily dropped the prevarications with which he had greeted Constantine XI's call for help. In September 1453 he issued the crusading bull *Etsi Ecclesia Christi*, calling on Christians to take the Cross and embark on a crusade to recover Constantinople from Mehmed II, whom the Pope described as 'son of Satan, perdition and death'. Throughout Europe churchmen and intellectuals took up their pens in support of the cause. Cardinal Bessarion wrote to the doge of Venice to exhort him to participate, waxing lyrical on the enormity of the disaster albeit with some exaggeration of Constantinople's position before the disaster:

Wretched me! I cannot write about this without the most profound sorrow. A city which was so flourishing, with such a great empire, so many illustrious men, such very famous and ancient families, so prosperous, the head of all Greece, the splendour and glory of the East, the school of the best arts, the refuge of all good things, has been captured, despoiled, ravaged and completely sacked by the most inhuman barbarians and the most savage enemies of the Christian faith, by the fiercest of wild beasts.

The response to the emotional appeal was enthusiastic, as some of Europe's most powerful rulers came forward to take the Cross. In February 1454, Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy (r. 1419–1467), and his leading nobles publicly took a vow to go on crusade at a lavish banquet at Lille. In November 1455, Alfonso of Aragon followed suit, promising to lead a force of four hundred ships and fifty thousand men against the Turks. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III (r. 1440–1493), called a council of princes to Frankfurt, at which it

was proposed that a force of forty thousand men be sent to Hungary. Meanwhile Nicholas V's successor as Pope, Calixtus III (r. 1455–1458), added action to the words of the crusading bull and started melting down papal treasures to pay for the building of a fleet. At this crucial juncture, the Ottomans suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the Hungarians outside Belgrade in July 1456, at which as many as twenty-four thousand Turks were said to have died. If the combined forces of Hungary, Burgundy, Aragon and the western empire were now unleashed to exploit the victory, Mehmed II would be in very serious trouble indeed.⁹

News of these developments got back to the Morea and, in spite of the help that the sultan had given against the rebellion, it was impossible to resist the temptation to take advantage of the prevailing current. In 1456, Thomas Palaiologos sent John Argyropoulos as his envoy to the west to discuss 'the defence of Christians against the power and preparedness of the most pernicious enemy of the faith, the Turk, who directs all his efforts towards the oppression of the faith of Jesus Christ'. It was a carefully thought-out choice, for Argyropoulos was a well-known supporter of the Union of Florence and he was warmly welcomed in Rome by Pope Calixtus. From Rome, Argyropoulos moved on to Milan, France and England, while Thomas sent other representatives to Alfonso of Aragon and to Venice. Action against the Turks was not the only item on the agenda. Thomas wanted particularly to clarify whether he and his family could take refuge in Venetian territory in the event of a Turkish invasion of the Morea, while the Venetians were anxious to talk about the depredations made by Albanian troops in Thomas's service on their territory in the Peloponnese.¹⁰

So likely did a western attack against the Ottomans look that Demetrius decided to jump on the bandwagon, soften his anti-Latin stance and court the Catholic powers of the west as well. He revived his

contact with Alfonso of Aragon, with whom he had concluded an anti-Ottoman treaty in February 1451. The possibility of a marriage alliance was raised once more, it being proposed this time that Demetrius's daughter Helena should marry Alfonso's grandson. Demetrius even wooed Pope Calixtus in spite of his personal views on the Union of Florence. In December 1455, he sent a rival envoy of his own to Rome, Frankoulios Servopoulos, another carefully chosen supporter of the Union. Servopoulos probably arrived in Rome at about the same time as Thomas's representative, Argyropoulos, and the two envoys then travelled on independently to France and England. What the courts they visited made of having two ambassadors from the same part of the world arriving one after the other with an almost identical message is anyone's guess. In their diplomacy, as in everything else, the brothers were incapable of working together.¹¹

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As it turned out, all this effort was in vain for most of the crusading rhetoric being aired in Europe turned out to be no more than that. Neither the duke of Burgundy, nor the king of Naples, nor any other Catholic monarch ever set out with their armies against Mehmed II. Unfortunately, it would seem that Demetrius and Thomas had both become so convinced that they would soon be receiving military aid from the west that they had stopped bothering to pay the sultan the annual tribute as promised after his army had rescued them from the Albanians. When it was three years overdue and envoys sent to collect it had returned empty-handed, Mehmed's patience was at an end. He had got wind of the negotiations between the brothers and the Catholic powers and was becoming worried that one of them might invite in a western ruler such as Alfonso of Aragon, who would use the Morea as a springboard to attack Ottoman territory in the Balkans.¹²

Unlike his counterparts in the west, the sultan did not just talk about action. After making careful preparations over the winter, in the spring of 1458 he set out from Adrianople with his army. He did not hurry, hoping that the show of force would bring the despots' representatives hurrying north with the tribute. When no one came, the Ottoman army headed for the Isthmus of Corinth. Only when it was nearly there did some envoys finally arrive from Thomas Palaiologos, bringing part of the required tribute. Mehmed accepted the money but commented drily that peace would now be made when he was inside the Morea. He reached the Isthmus in May, just as the corn was ripening in the fields round about. With the Hexamilion wall now gone, the first line of defence was the towering fortress of the Acrocorinth. Mehmed's army was well equipped with cannon and siege engines but the sultan was dubious as to whether he could really take such a strong fortification by storm. The usual offer of surrender was refused, but when Mehmed's cannon opened fire on the walls they did little damage, as they had to fire upwards and from a long way off. Since he had no shortage of troops at his disposal, Mehmed left a detachment to blockade the Acrocorinth and moved on into the interior.

The progress of Mehmed's army through the Byzantine Peloponnese was virtually unopposed. It burned and pillaged at will, capturing the fortified towns one by one. The town of Mouchli presented the most formidable obstacle between the Acrocorinth and Mistra. Mehmed had it surrounded with a stockade in preparation for a long siege, but the work proved unnecessary. The commander of the town decided not to resist and surrendered after a few days. An army that had been gathered by the despots to bar the sultan's progress melted away when it heard the news from Mouchli. The Turks now swung north, into the territory ruled by the Despot Thomas, and headed for his capital of Patras. On the news of their approach many of the inhabitants fled across the Gulf of Corinth to Venetian territory and only the citadel was left defended.

Once Mehmed arrived and occupied the city, the citadel surrendered too, bringing to an end the short period of Byzantine rule that had begun in 1429. Mehmed then headed back toward the Acrocorinth, accepting the surrender of the town of Vostitsa on the way.¹³

Given the ease with which Mehmed had subdued the rest of the Peloponnese, it might have been expected that the Acrocorinth would now give in as well. Mehmed had probably hoped that his forces would have been able to starve the fortress out while he was in the interior. That had not happened and the defenders were still defiant. So the sultan had to make plans to capture the place. A full-scale assault was launched against the outer walls after they had suffered some damage from cannon fire, but the Turks found themselves unable to penetrate beyond them in the face of spirited defence and a rain of missiles hurled down from above. Mehmed was compelled to order his troops to retire. At this juncture, Matthew Asanes, the brother-in-law of the despot Demetrius, arrived from Mistra with seventy men. This small force succeeded in creeping into the Acrocorinth by night along a precipitous path known only to a few. The defenders were heartened by their arrival, not least because each man brought with him a sack of wheat. Nearly four months had now gone by since Mehmed had first invested the fortress and the garrison's supplies were running low. Asanes's contingent was, however, no relieving force. He had not come to bolster the defence but to seek peace from the sultan on the best terms he could. He had been given specific instructions not to surrender the despots' last card, the Acrocorinth, but so shocked was he by the sight of the half-starved defenders that he forgot his orders. On 6 August, Asanes surrendered the impregnable fortress to the sultan.¹⁴

The voluntary surrender of the Acrocorinth would probably explain why the terms that Mehmed now dictated were relatively lenient and why he did not annex the whole of the Morea there and then. The defenders of the Acrocorinth were all allowed to depart in safety and

were replaced with a garrison of four hundred janissaries. The annual tribute was reimposed on the despots while all the territory that Mehmed had conquered during the campaign, which came to about a third of the Morea, was to pass under his rule, under the governorship of Umur Pasha. The despots were to remain in possession of the rest of the peninsula and the sultan promised to send them military help if they were attacked by anyone else. He probably had Alfonso of Aragon in mind in this last clause. The surrender of the Acrocorinth removed, as Sphrantzes put it, the head from the body of the Morea. There was no longer any barrier to stop the Turks marching south and ravaging the Morea at will. Demetrius and Thomas had survived but their rule was effectively at an end.

The sultan's victory did not bring peace to the Morea, however. It actually had the effect of sharpening the antagonism between the brothers. It had quickly cured Demetrius of his fleeting flirtation with the west and brought him back to his original pro-Ottoman allegiance. Indeed, Mehmed went out of his way to cultivate Demetrius, announcing the following year that he would marry Demetrius's daughter Helena and so putting an end to the despot's marriage negotiations with Alfonso of Aragon. Thomas, on the other hand, was pushed towards a more overt pro-Latin stance because Mehmed's invasion and the subsequent treaty had damaged him much more than it had his brother. The area of the Morea that was now annexed by the sultan was almost entirely that which Thomas had ruled, including his capital of Patras.¹⁵ For the younger despot, the promotion of Demetrius and the loss of most of his appanage was more than flesh and blood could stand. In January 1459 he joined with a number of Albanian lords and revolted against Demetrius and the occupying Turks. They seized the castle of Kalavryta and many of the lands round about in the centre of the Morea and laid siege to Demetrius's fortresses of Kalamata and Mantinea. Demetrius responded swiftly by seizing

Thomas's town of Leondari, calling the Turks who occupied the northern part of the peninsula to his aid. Various attempts were made to make peace between the brothers and at one point they met at Kastritza and declared themselves reconciled in the presence of a local archbishop. The truce did not last and before long hostilities were resumed. Sphrantzes and other nobles looked on in horror as the civil war got under way, and some of them took refuge in the Venetian town of Modon to avoid getting involved. As Sphrantzes summed up the conflict:

Both brothers fought against each other with all their resources. Lord Demetrius rested his hopes on the friendship and help of the sultan, and on his claim that his subjects and castles had been wronged, while Lord Thomas relied on the fact that his opponent had committed perjury and that he was waging war against the impious.

Thomas's claim to be fighting the Turks for the good of Christendom brought some benefit, for although Demetrius had the greater resources at his disposal, Thomas and the Albanians could appeal to the west. Following a successful melee with some Turkish troops, Thomas selected sixteen of the captives and sent them off under armed guard to Rome to convince the new Pope Pius II that he was engaged on a crusade against the infidel. The ploy worked and the Pope sent a contingent of three hundred Italian troops under the Milanese condottiere Gianone da Cremona to the Peloponnese. These reinforcements seem to have given Thomas the edge. Demetrius's army was defeated and he had to retire with his family to the only safe place left, the town of Monemvasia.¹⁶

From Monemvasia, Demetrius sent Matthew Asanes to Adrianople to implore the sultan to come in person and help him against his brother. Mehmed had plenty of other commitments at the time but

again he was swayed by the fear that Thomas planned to invite in a western army of which Gianone da Cremona's contingent was just the vanguard. In April 1460 the sultan set out for the Peloponnese once more, yet his first objective was not the Despot Thomas and his army, but the lands ruled by Demetrius. He encountered no resistance and sent Mahmud Pasha on ahead with a small force to locate Demetrius. Mahmud found the despot at Mistra and kept him a virtual prisoner pending the arrival of Mehmed. The sultan finally got there at the end of May, whereupon Demetrius handed over the keys of Mistra, effectively resigning as despot.

That left Mehmed free to deal with the more recalcitrant Thomas and he led his army west from Mistra to attack the towns of Kastritza and Gardiki, the one being taken by storm and the second surrendering after only a day's siege. As for Thomas, when he heard of Mehmed's invasion, he holed up with his family and followers in the castle at Mantinea and waited on events. When news came that the Turks were heading towards Leondari and would soon be in Mantinea, the despot and his entourage fled to a fishing village on the coast. There some ships that had been equipped in advance were waiting for them and they sailed to the Venetian-ruled island of Corfu, which they reached on 22 July. Corfu was at best only a temporary refuge. Its government was unwilling to have the despot there for too long for fear of antagonising the Turks, yet it was by no means clear where else he could go. An approach was made to Ragusa but that was firmly turned down by the city's Senate. Meanwhile a message arrived from the sultan, promising the despot a grant of lands if he would enter into a treaty of friendship. Hedging his bets, Thomas sent one of courtiers to the sultan and another to the Pope to explain his predicament. The envoy to Mehmed found the sultan at Verroia in Macedonia, but he was immediately arrested and put in chains along with his followers. After a few days he was released and sent back to

Corfu with the message that Thomas was to come to the sultan in person or to send some of his children.¹⁷

It was this message that seems to have made up Thomas's mind. Perhaps he remembered the fate of Loukas Notaras or perhaps he simply felt that he had no alternative. On 16 November 1460, leaving his wife and children behind, he boarded a ship in the harbour of Corfu and set sail for the Italian port of Ancona in the Papal States. The following March he reached Rome itself where he threw himself on the mercy of the Pope, presenting him with an important relic, the head of St Andrew, which he had brought with him from Patras. Pius II received him kindly as a refugee from Turkish oppression. He provided him with a pension of 300 ducats a month and even presented him with the Golden Rose, an accolade accorded to rulers who had shown zeal for the Catholic faith. Thomas had, of course, shown rather more zeal for plotting against his brother Demetrius, but Pius probably did not know that.¹⁸

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The despots had made their choices for east or west. Now it was up to the rest of the Byzantines to decide. For most people who had little in the way of wealth or position the decision was simple: to stay and attempt to continue life as usual under the new Ottoman regime. In fact, Mehmed II did his best to make that option an easy one and to ensure as much continuity as possible with the past. That was particularly the case in matters of religion, for very soon after the fall of Constantinople the sultan had set about regularising the position of Orthodox Christians under his rule. There had been no patriarch in Constantinople since the flight of the Unionist Gregory Melissenos to Rome in 1450. For obvious reasons, Mehmed was keen to have the Orthodox Church under the control of those who opposed the Union and he therefore gave orders that

the anti-Unionist leader Gennadios should be located as soon as possible. He was eventually found in Adrianople, where he had been taken as a slave but had been fortunate enough to end up with a master who was rather impressed by his erudition. His ransom was paid and he was brought before Mehmed who persuaded him to accept the office of patriarch. On 6 January 1454, Gennadios was enthroned in Constantinople according to the same rites and ceremonial as had prevailed in Byzantine times. Mehmed even took the role formerly played by the emperor, handing the new patriarch his staff of office. Although it was not officially abrogated by the Orthodox Church until 1484, the installation of Gennadios as patriarch effectively killed off the Union of Florence, at least for Orthodox Christians under Ottoman rule.¹⁹

Just as Mehmed had no desire to attempt to convert his non-Muslim subjects to Islam, so he had no intention of clearing them out of the newly conquered cities and replacing them with Turks. He had grand plans for Constantinople in particular and hoped to restore it to its former glory as an impressive new capital of the Ottoman empire. He planned to reside there and immediately after the conquest he had given orders for the construction of a new palace in the area of the Forum of Theodosius. It was completed two years later and Mehmed moved in, but before long the sultan felt he needed something grander. He chose a new site to the north of the mosque of Hagia Sophia where work began on a walled complex of buildings that came to be known as the Topkapi palace. No expense was spared on the project. Artists were brought from Italy to decorate the walls of the public rooms with portraits of the sultan and his courtiers and those of the private apartments with erotic scenes. Mehmed also planned a splendid new mosque with a tomb worthy of the conqueror of Constantinople nearby. Work on these monuments began in 1462.²⁰

These building projects could not take place in a vacuum. They needed a thriving city that could provide labour and tax revenue. New

life would have to be breathed into the shattered and depopulated wreck that had been left after the events of 29 May 1453, and Mehmed decided that the best way to do so was to re-establish a Christian population. Following his campaigns in the Morea in 1458 and 1460, the sultan sent many of his Christian captives to settle in his new capital and he transferred there the populations of entire towns in Asia Minor. He was keen to court the survivors of the small minority of Byzantines who had been rich and influential under the previous regime. After the execution of Notaras, he seems to have swung back to the view that they could be useful to him or at least that it would be advisable to persuade them not to go to Italy where they might cause trouble. Some eighteen months after the fall of Constantinople he issued a decree addressed to the members of specific Byzantine families, including those of Sphrantzes, Laskaris and Philanthropinos, promising security for their lives, families and goods if they would return to live in Constantinople. According to Kritovoulos:

He wanted those of the nobility whom he approved of to live there with their wives and children. Accordingly he gave them houses and lands and provisions for living and tried in every way to help them.

By the 1470s, numerous members of old Byzantine families were once more living in Constantinople. George Amiroutzes of Trebizond, who had been part of the Byzantine delegation to the Council of Florence, was given a pension and brought to live at Mehmed's court. Matthew Asanes, who had surrendered the Acrocorinth, seems to have become some kind of adviser to Mehmed, accompanying him on campaign in Bosnia. Others became prominent as tax farmers, merchants and ship-owners, alongside Armenians, Georgians and Jews. They were given freedom to practise their Orthodox religion and although the larger churches were converted into mosques, most were left alone.²¹

It was much the same in other towns that had once been part of the Byzantine empire. Following the wholesale pillage that occurred during the Ottoman capture of Thessalonica in 1430, for example, life soon returned to normal. Like Mehmed, Murad II had been anxious to get his newly conquered city back on its feet again as soon as possible and especially for the city's famous market to begin functioning once more. So while he handed over some of the best sites in the city to Turkish settlers and most of the major churches and monasteries were seized and turned into mosques, Murad actively encouraged Byzantines who had abandoned the city in previous years to return. He allowed them for the time being to keep their cathedral of St Demetrius so that they could continue to celebrate the feast day of their patron saint there. When a census was taken in 1478, it emerged from the count that Greek Christians were still in the majority and had not been ejected in favour of Turks. When demographic change did occur later in the fifteenth century, the incomers were not Muslim Turks but Jews, probably refugees from Spain, who no doubt were encouraged to settle by the Ottoman authorities because of their commercial skills.²²

Away from the towns continuity was even more marked. On Limnos there was virtually no Turkish settlement whatsoever. There was an Ottoman garrison but it would seem that only 20 of the 281 men stationed there in 1489 were actually Turks. Most were Christian auxiliaries. Life for the islanders must therefore have been much the same as it had been when they had paid their taxes to the Byzantine emperor rather than to the sultan.²³ In the Peloponnese many members of the old Byzantine aristocracy found a place for themselves in the new order. As the Ottoman army had marched through the Morea in the summer of 1460, many had hastened to surrender. One gave up his castle and handed over his two sons as hostages, and in return the sultan gave him the lordship of the village of Loi. A few Byzantines went further than just accepting a return to the status quo under

the new regime and converted to Islam. Being Muslim gave them the opportunity to retain their distinguished role and to rise high in the sultan's service. Two sons of Thomas Gides Palaiologos embraced Islam and took the names of Meshih and Hass Murad. Both rose to become pashas in the sultan's army.²⁴

The most prominent Byzantines to accept a place under Mehmed's rule were the despot Demetrius, his wife Theodora and his daughter Helena. Demetrius was clearly very anxious about his likely fate when the sultan had arrived at Mistra in May 1460. He need not have worried. When he was brought into Mehmed's presence:

The sultan honoured him by rising from his throne to receive him as he entered the tent, giving him his right hand, seating him by his side, and speaking many peaceable and kindly words. He comforted him in mild and affable terms, dispersing his misgivings and allaying his fears, for he realised that the man was afraid and disturbed.

After showering Demetrius with gifts, Mehmed ordered that his wife and daughter be brought from Monemvasia to join him and at the conclusion of the Morea campaign they accompanied him back to Adrianople. There Mehmed made generous provision for the support of the sultan's household, granting him the revenues of the islands of Limnos, Imbros, Thasos and Samothrace, and those of the salt pans that were situated at the nearby town of Ainos.²⁵

The impression given so far may be that for all ranks of Byzantine society, life under Ottoman rule was an easy transition from the past and that although they were now subjects of the sultan, Greek Christians settled down to prosperous and contented lives. Unfortunately that was not always the case. The Ottoman empire was no paradise of multi-cultural toleration. Non-Muslims were second-class citizens whose fragile rights could be revoked arbitrarily at any time. Although Mehmed II

might choose to be accommodating when it suited him, there was no guarantee that he, or his subordinates for that matter, would remain so. He was notorious for the kind of sudden change of mood that had swept away Notaras and his sons. According to one observer at the Ottoman court:

He need only suspect a lord vizier, captain, soldier or ordinary subject of committing a fault and he kills him without mercy, regardless of what a great lord he may be. When he sends a slave with a letter to the judge of a town, however remote, and the letter is given to the judge, the judge, without further investigation, has the persons decapitated who are mentioned in the letter . . .²⁶

Those who had submitted to Mehmed and had even prospered under him soon discovered the limits of his benevolence. Gennadios, whom Mehmed had installed as patriarch in 1454, was originally given the church of the Holy Apostles as his seat, the second largest church in Constantinople after Hagia Sophia. The patriarch and his staff soon began to feel uneasy, however. One morning the dead body of a Turk was found in the courtyard of the church and the clergy became alarmed that they might suffer the same fate. So they all moved to the much smaller monastery of the Pammakaristos that stood closer to the Golden Horn in an area heavily populated with Christian settlers brought in on Mehmed's orders. It can hardly have been a coincidence that very shortly afterwards work began on demolishing the Holy Apostles and replacing it with Mehmed's own foundation, the Mosque of the Conqueror.²⁷

Even men who had attained high office and wealth under the sultan quickly learned that Mehmed could take away as easily as he gave. Mahmud Pasha, who was of Serbian and Byzantine descent and who rose to become chief vizier, was suddenly arrested and executed in 1474

for reasons that are unclear. The Genoese former ruler of Lesbos, Nicolò Gattilusio, converted to Islam after Mehmed II conquered his island but he too ended up being executed. The ex-despot Demetrius also experienced a dramatic change of fortune. He found himself accused of dishonesty in his handling of the revenues of the Ainos salt-pans and his income was stopped on Mehmed's orders. Reduced to poverty, Demetrius was abandoned by his companions who had depended on him for their maintenance. Only when he stood as a supplicant in the street to beg as Mehmed rode by did he receive a meagre pension to keep body and soul together. He seems to have ended his life as a monk in Adrianople sometime around 1470. His daughter Helena had died shortly before, the planned marriage to Mehmed having been quietly forgotten once the despot's usefulness was at an end.²⁸

Mehmed's ruthlessness in waging war may have been another reason why some Byzantines preferred not to live under his rule. Unlike his father Murad, Mehmed felt under no obligation to spare the lives of those who surrendered to him, even if he had promised them their safety, claiming that he had a duty to avenge Muslim blood. During his campaign in the Morea in 1460, Mehmed had taken the town of Kastritza by storm and had accepted the surrender of that of Gardiki. The inhabitants of both towns, men, women and children, were either killed or enslaved. It is hardly surprising then that some Byzantines continued to defy Mehmed during the Morea campaign even when the situation was obviously hopeless. Constantine Palaiologos Graitzas, commander of the fortress of Salmeniko on the coast of the Gulf of Corinth between Patras and Vostitsa, refused to surrender to the sultan like so many others and held out until July 1461. The inhabitants of the town of Monemvasia refused to hand their town over to Mehmed and preferred to offer it to the Pope. Pius II accepted and sent a garrison to defend the place. Monemvasia's almost

impregnable situation meant that it could survive even when Mehmed controlled the rest of the Peloponnese, and the Ottomans did not succeed in taking the town until 1540. Other places that did not have Monemvasia's advantages could not hope to hold out and for their inhabitants the only alternative to accommodation with Mehmed was escape to the west.²⁹

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Those who did not want to wait for the arrival of Mehmed's army in the summer of 1460, or to surrender to the sultan, fled to territory under Venetian rule, either to the towns of Modon and Coron or across the Gulf of Corinth to Lepanto. If they had access to ships, they could go even further. Many of Thomas Palaiologos's courtiers accompanied him to Corfu or followed on later. George Sphrantzes and his wife arrived on the island about a month after the despot and the main party, having boarded a ship at Modon. They had planned to make for Crete but decided to go to Corfu when they heard that the despot had gone there. Sphrantzes later retired to a monastery where he died some-time after 1478. Other refugees from the Morea preferred to move on from Venetian territory to Italy proper. Some accompanied the despot Thomas when he crossed to Ancona in 1461; others followed later. Constantine Palaiologos Graitzas, who had held out for so long in the castle of Salmeniko, abandoned the fortress in July 1461 and sailed to Venice.³⁰

Many of these new arrivals from the Morea gravitated towards Rome, where they joined other Byzantines who had migrated to Italy in earlier years both before and after the fall of Constantinople. Cardinals Bessarion and Isidore were still there, although the patriarch Gregory Melissenos had died in 1459. With Melissenos's death Pope Pius II, who did not recognise the Orthodox Gennadios and his succes-

sors, appointed Isidore as the new patriarch of Constantinople and when Isidore passed away in 1463, the post went to Bessarion. Also in Rome was the former despot Thomas, who had taken up residence in the Hospital of the Holy Spirit.³¹

At first, in the years immediately after the fall of the Morea, there were good grounds for hoping that the sojourn of these exiles in the west would be a brief one. By 1460, plans for a crusade against Mehmed II were once more being made and were at an advanced stage thanks to the efforts of Pius II, who had made the recovery of Constantinople one of the major goals of his pontificate. He called a congress to the town of Mantua to discuss the project and after much discussion and some bickering succeeded in extorting from the great powers promises that amounted to an army of eighty-eight thousand men. There would be naval support too, for in the summer of 1463, Venice, provoked by Ottoman incursions onto its lands in Greece, declared war on the sultan. There was no longer any need for the republic to maintain a pretence of neutrality. Buoyed up by these successes, the Pope wrote a letter to Mehmed II, earnestly advising him to convert to Christianity:

An insignificant trifle can make you the greatest, the most powerful, the most famous of living mortals. You ask what it is? . . . It can be found everywhere: a little water with which to be baptised . . .

Mehmed made no move to avail himself of this beguiling invitation and in October 1463, Pius issued the bull *Ezechielis Prophetae* in which he formally declared war on the Ottomans, and he began to gather his fleet in the port of Ancona.³²

Not surprisingly, Thomas Palaiologos was eager to be involved with the preparations, which held the promise of restoration to his lost lands in the Morea and perhaps even to Constantinople itself. Early in 1462

the ex-despot set out on a tour of Italy to drum up support for the expedition. Like his father Manuel and his brother John, Thomas was lucky enough to possess good looks and a kingly mien which lent weight to his appeal. Some Milanese ambassadors who encountered him in Venice described him as being 'as dignified as any man on earth can be'. The Mantuan ambassador in Rome described him as 'a handsome man with a fine, serious look about him and a noble and quite lordly bearing'. In short, he was a perfect match for the role of virtuous Christian prince wronged by the infidel Turks and he was armed with a letter from Pius II that described him in exactly those terms. But if he really thought that a western crusade would restore him to his homeland, he was to be disappointed. He soon discovered that not everyone bought into his sales pitch. The Venetian Senate made it abundantly clear that they wanted nothing to do with him. They instructed their ambassador in Rome to persuade the Pope not to allow Thomas to accompany the proposed expedition because his presence would 'produce terrible and incongruous scandals'. They may have had in mind Thomas's struggles with his brother Demetrius or his covert encroachment on Venetian interests when he was despot. Whichever it was, in the end the issue of Thomas's participation was irrelevant. When the expedition was ready to sail, Pius II travelled to Ancona to join it but shortly after his arrival there he died on 15 August 1464. Robbed of its leader, the expedition was stillborn and the ships one by one left the harbour and sailed home.³³

After 1464, there can have been few Byzantine exiles in Italy who believed that they would shortly be returning to Constantinople at the head of a conquering Latin army. They would have to find some means of surviving in their new home, for few had much in the way of money or possessions. Many sought out the patronage of the prominent exiles such as the cardinals, Bessarion and Isidore, and the surviving members of the Notaras family. The two cardinals were immensely wealthy. They

enjoyed all the advantages of being princes of the Church, owning grand houses and drawing revenues from large estates. Bessarion's house close to the church of the Holy Apostles in Rome became a lodging and meeting place for Byzantine exiles, and both cardinals played their part in paying ransoms. The surviving children of the executed grand duke Loukas Notaras, Anna and Isaac Notaras and their sisters, had taken up residence in Venice where they became leaders of the city's growing Greek community. The ex-despot Thomas likewise supported many of those who had travelled west with him from his papal pension, though his financial resources were considerably smaller than either the cardinals or the Notaras.³⁴

Unfortunately, the patronage of the cardinals and the exiled despot could not last for ever. Isidore died in 1463 and in May 1465 Thomas Palaiologos breathed his last in his apartment at the hospital of the Holy Spirit. He was not the last of the exiled Palaiologoi. A few weeks after his death his three youngest children, Andreas, Manuel and Zoe, arrived from Corfu, having been sent for by their father. The Pope recognised the twelve-year-old Andreas as Thomas's successor as despot of the Morea and accorded the children the same pension that their father had received. Their education and upbringing was entrusted to Cardinal Bessarion, who arranged for Zoe to marry the grand duke of Moscow, Ivan III (r. 1462–1505), in 1472. Unfortunately for Andreas, Manuel and all the Byzantine exiles in Rome, Bessarion died in November 1472 while travelling back from a legatine mission to France. 'From whom else now can we draw courage and inspiration?', lamented one of his former protégés: 'In whom else can we take pride – we who have suffered so much? He was for all of us the voice of our nation – nay, more than that, its life-blood.' The sons of Thomas Palaiologos soon felt the loss of their powerful protector. As the 1470s went on the popes found themselves embroiled in a series of costly Italian wars and they could not resist the temptation of

cutting back the pension paid to the Palaiologos brothers. Even the full pension had not been enough decently to support their father and all his companions. Now with it reduced still further Andreas, Manuel and their retinue slowly sank into poverty, and there was nobody at the papal court to fight their cause.³⁵

With the cardinals dead and the exiled Palaiologoi unable to dispense any patronage, Byzantine exiles had to find some other way of supporting themselves. The better educated among them were able to profit from the interest of their Italian hosts in ancient Greek literature, as Manuel Chrysoloras had. Some found success and prosperity. John Argyropoulos had arrived in Italy in 1456 as an envoy of Thomas Palaiologos but did not return to the Morea because in October that year he was offered the chair of Greek at the University of Florence, the post that had once been held by Chrysoloras. The lectures that Argyropoulos gave on Aristotle there proved extremely popular and he was able to bring his wife and children from Constantinople, presumably after paying off their ransoms. He spent the rest of his life in Italy, dying in 1487, it was said, from eating too much watermelon. Few enjoyed the success of Argyropoulos and the best that most educated Byzantine émigrés could hope for was to scratch an uncertain living copying Greek manuscripts. Demetrius Leontaris, who had toured Europe trying to raise the ransom of his family in the 1460s, ended up working as a copyist in Otranto. Two former members of the household of Bessarion left Italy to find employment elsewhere. One of them, Andronicus Kallistos, is said to have died in London, friendless and alone. The other, George Hermonymos, ended up in Paris teaching Greek to extremely unappreciative students. Even Argyropoulos did not have unalloyed prosperity, for it was said that towards the end of his life he had to sell his books one by one to make ends meet.³⁶

Not all the Byzantine exiles sought their livelihoods in the uncertain world of scholarship. Some became mercenary soldiers in the service of

foreign rulers. George Palaiologos Dishypatos was only a child at the time of the fall of Constantinople and had probably been taken to Italy by his refugee parents. In the early 1470s he was employed by the king of England as a member of the garrison of Calais and later he entered the employ of the king of France, Louis XI (r. 1461–1483). Like Argyropoulos in Florence, Dishypatos enjoyed some success and prosperity. He was given charge of a number of towns and castles in Normandy, the command of King Louis's own ship, a generous annual pension and a house in Bordeaux. By 1480 his social position was secure enough for him to make an advantageous marriage with a wealthy Frenchwoman, by which he came into possession of a small chateau near Beauvais. Again, not everyone was so fortunate. Another Byzantine nobleman ended his life fighting against the Moors of Granada as an obscure common soldier.³⁷

Given that life was not always ideal either in the east or in the west, the choice between the two was not necessarily a permanent one. Demetrius Kastρινος, who was a protégé of Cardinal Bessarion and taught for a time in Florence, was later compelled by poverty to return to his homeland. Others who had tried to live under Ottoman rule later fled to the west. In 1486 a member of the Laskaris family arrived in Rome. He had held lands around the town of Serres in Macedonia, well inside Ottoman territory, but was now claiming that four families in the area were being held to ransom by the Turks. Wealthy Christians were probably very vulnerable to this kind of extortion.³⁸

Nor did the dilemma end with the first generation who had lived through the fall of Constantinople and the Morea. The youngest son of the former despot Thomas, Manuel Palaiologos, had been born in 1455 and had spent much of his childhood on Corfu and in Rome. By the time he reached adulthood, he and his elder brother Andreas were struggling to live on a meagre and shrinking papal pension. Eager to escape from poverty, Manuel travelled north to offer his services as a

soldier to the dukes of Milan and Burgundy. When he failed to receive a satisfactory offer, he returned to Rome only to find that the pension had been halved to take account of his absence. In despair, Manuel left Rome again in the spring of 1476 and this time he headed east to Constantinople, a city that he had never seen before. He was a little uncertain as to what kind of reception he would receive, but Mehmed welcomed him with all the charm that he had bestowed on his late uncle Demetrius. Manuel was granted some lands to provide him with an income as well as a military salary of 100 aspers a day. The sultan even thoughtfully furnished Manuel with two female slaves by whom he fathered two sons. He lived happily in Constantinople for the rest of his life, remaining a Christian until his death sometime during the reign of Mehmed II's son and successor, Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512).³⁹

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Byzantium was no more. It had ceased to be a political entity with Mehmed II's campaign in the Morea in the summer of 1460. Its inhabitants had either accepted the rule of the Ottoman sultan or fled abroad. Yet the ghost of the shadow empire lingered on. It haunted the minds of those who had exchanged the rule of the emperor for that of the sultan, such as Michael Kritovoulos who, looking back, felt that Byzantium had fallen not through any fault of its people but simply through the turn of fortune's wheel. It persisted in the memories of the exiles in the west like Alexios Effomatos, who was living in London in the 1470s and lamented in English that there were 'noone of his cuntree and tonge' to keep him company there.⁴⁰ Even when in the course of time the last of these survivors died and Byzantium had passed out of living memory, aspects of its culture and identity survived. The Orthodox Church continued to command the allegiance

of most of the descendants of the Byzantines, in spite of defections to Catholicism and Islam. It used much the same liturgy and ceremonial as it had under the emperors. Churches continued to be built and religious icons to be painted in a recognisable Byzantine style, not only in the lands of the former empire but also in other Orthodox countries such as Russia. The Greek language of the Palaiologoi and their subjects was also spoken by their descendants, albeit with a generous infiltration of Turkish and Italian loan words. At the end of the day, although the empire was unable to stand up to the powerful forces arrayed against it, Byzantine religion, art and language proved remarkably enduring. Centuries after the fall of Constantinople, those survivals imbued the Greek-speaking subjects of the Ottoman sultan who still considered themselves to be 'Romans' with a sense of their separate and distinct identity and the hope that a Christian emperor might one day rule in Constantinople once more.

Epilogue

EARLY IN THE year 1492, the first Tudor king of England, Henry VII (r.1485–1509), had a visitor. It was clearly not someone whom he regarded as being of great importance. In a warrant to his treasurer and chancellor, Henry described the new arrival rather vaguely as ‘the Greek for whom our holy father the pope and divers cardinals have written unto us’ and directed that they ‘appoint some convenient sum of money to be given unto the same Greek by way of reward’. Only the following day did the identity of the visitor emerge. Another document named him as Andreas Palaiologos, ‘heir to the empire of Constantinople’. This letter, however, was a safe conduct out of the kingdom of England. The heir to the empire of Constantinople was effectively being shown the door.

The brief visit of the son of the Despot Thomas to England was part of a wider European tour. In 1490 he had left Rome and travelled to Moscow where his younger sister Zoe, or Sophia as she was now known, was married to the grand duke Ivan III. The following year he was in France and it was from there that he crossed to England. The object of the tour was simple: Andreas needed money to supplement the dwindling pension that he received from the Pope and he was begging for it from the rulers of Europe. It was not an edifying spectacle. On the one hand, no longer content to be called just despot of the Morea, Andreas

had taken to styling himself 'emperor of Constantinople' and to sealing his letters with an emblem of a double-headed eagle. On the other, the so-called emperor and his retinue lived a desperate hand-to-mouth existence. Andreas made ends meet by selling worthless titles to gullible social climbers and 'borrowing' his sister's jewels. In the end he even sold his own title of 'emperor of Constantinople' to the king of France in return for the promise of an annual pension of 4,300 ducats.

None of these activities did much to alleviate his difficulty and Andreas remained in abject poverty until he died in Rome in June 1502, just seven months short of his fiftieth birthday. He probably would have ended up in a pauper's grave, had not the Pope had the goodness to provide the money for a proper burial. As befitted a prince, Andreas was interred in St Peter's basilica next to his father, Thomas, but there was no splendid funeral, no sarcophagus of purple marble and no statue on a tall column. The heir of Byzantium had slipped from life to death without anybody seeming to notice. If there was any kind of monument, it disappeared long ago, probably during the 1530s and 1540s when St Peter's was demolished and rebuilt. In any case, by then not only Andreas Palaiologos but even the empire that his ancestors had once ruled over were long since forgotten.

No one has ever had much sympathy for Andreas, either at the time or after. Gossip in Rome blamed the Byzantine prince's troubles on 'excessive love making and pleasures'. His behaviour has been denounced as 'hardly imperial' because he fell heavily into debt and allegedly married 'a lady from the streets of Rome'. These criticisms are not entirely fair. The name of Andreas's wife, Caterina, is only known from one document in the Vatican Archives and it gives no details about her social origins. The implication that she was a prostitute is entirely unsubstantiated. As for the debts, they were not Andreas's fault but rather the inevitable outcome of the systematic reduction of his pension by the Pope, who had to make economies to pay for his interminable wars in Italy.¹

Just as Andreas was not entirely responsible for his own predicament, when his conduct and actions are scrutinised closely it emerges that he acted in much the same way as his Byzantine predecessors before 1453. After all, if Andreas travelled around Europe trying to evoke sympathy and charity, so did his grandfather Manuel II in 1399–1403. Andreas put titles and honours up for sale, but so had his uncle John VIII while he was in Italy for the Council of Florence. Andreas sold his sister's jewels, but other members of his family had also been prepared to part with bits of their inheritance for hard cash. His great-uncle Theodore, when despot in the Morea in 1400, had dangled Corinth first in front of the Venetians and then the Knights of St John, asking for something in the region of 43,000 ducats. His second cousin John VII had offered Constantinople to the king of France in 1387 for 25,000 ducats and a suitable French castle, when the city was not even his to sell. Andreas even resorted to trade to make ends meet, investing in cargoes exported from Italy, but then again so had many wealthy Byzantines in the years before 1453.²

In short, Andreas's behaviour was entirely consistent with the way the Palaiologoi and their subjects had reacted to the situation in which they found themselves during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. Faced with the overwhelming military superiority of the Ottoman Turks, few Byzantines had chosen the path of heroic resistance that the Pseudo-Sphrantzes chronicle attributes to Constantine XI. Instead they conserved their wealth whenever possible and when the end came they adapted themselves to the new regime. It was just their misfortune to live in an age when the wealth and power of their society had been eroded to almost nothing and left them incapable of confronting the Ottomans militarily. Those who have never experienced such times should not judge them too harshly.



Notes

Abbreviations

<i>BMGS</i>	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>OCP</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
<i>PLP</i>	Erich Trapp et al., <i>Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit</i> , 14 vols (Vienna, 1976–96)
<i>REB</i>	<i>Revue des Études Byzantines</i>

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